OPERATION SEALORDS: A FRONT IN A FRONTLESS WAR, AN ANALYSIS OF THE BROWN-WATER NAVY IN VIETNAM

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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This study examines Operation SEALORDS, the capstone campaign conducted by the Brown-Water Navy in Vietnam. Specifically, this paper addresses the primary question: Was the SEALORDS campaign successful, and if so, what lessons, can be learned from SEALORDS and how might we employ brown-water forces in the future?

This thesis breaks down the SEALORDS campaign into three areas of study. First, the study examines the barrier interdiction portion of the campaign designed to stem the flow of enemy infiltration of men and material from Cambodia into the Mekong Delta. Second, this study analyzes the Denial of Sanctuary Operations and Pacification portion of the SEALORDS operations. Lastly, the Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese Program known as "ACTOV" is examined to determine its effectiveness.

The Findings of this study suggest that by concentrating naval forces athwart the major infiltration routes along the Cambodian border, SEALORDS effectively cut enemy lines of communication into South Vietnam and severly restricted enemy attempts at infiltration. Additionally, the findings suggest that SEALORDS contributed significantly to pacification efforts in the southern part of III Corps and all of the IV Corps Tactical Zone. Finally, the ACTOV Program is evaluated as successful and put the navy out ahead of the other services with respect to Vietnamization of the war effort.

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ABSTRACT

OPERATION SEALORDS: A FRONT IN A FRONTLESS WAR, AN ANALYSIS OF THE BROWN-WATER NAVY IN VIETNAM by LCDR William C. McQuilkin, USN, 86 pages.

This study examines Operation SEALORDS, the capstone campaign conducted by the brown-water Navy in Vietnam. Specifically, this paper addresses the primary question: Was the SEALORDS campaign successful, and if so, what lessons can be learned from SEALORDS and how might the Navy employ brown-water forces in the future?

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The findings of this study suggest that by concentrating naval forces athwart the major infiltration routes along the Cambodian border, SEALORDS effectively cut enemy lines of communication into South Vietnam and severely restricted enemy attempts at infiltration. Additionally, the findings suggest that SEALORDS contributed significantly to pacification efforts in the southern part of III Corps and all of the IV Corps Tactical Zone. Finally, the ACTOV Program is evaluated as successful and put the Navy out ahead of the other services with respect to Vietnamization of the war effort.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTOV	Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese
AMMI PONTOON	Multi-purpose barge, 28 feet by 90 feet
AO	Area of Operations
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ATSB	Advanced Tactical Support Base
ATC	Armored Troop Carrier
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Groups
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
COMNAVFORV	Commander Naval Forces Vietnam
COMUSMACV	Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam
CTF	Commander Task Force
CTG	Commander Task Group
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
ENIFF	Enemy Initiated Firefight
FRIFF	Friendly Initiated Firefight
GVN	Government of Vietnam
HAL	Helicopter Attack Light Squadron

HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
KIA	Killed in Action
LSD	Landing Ship, Dock
LST	Landing Ship, Tank
MRF	Mobile Riverine Force
NAVFORV	Naval Forces Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OPLAN	Operation Plan
PBR	Patrol Boat, River
PCF	Patrol Craft, Fast (Swift Boat)
PF	Popular (Provisional) Force
RAC	River Assault Craft
RAG	River Assault Group (VNN)
RAID	Riverine Assault Interdiction Division (VNN)
RF	Regional Force
RIVDIV	Riverine Division (USN)
RSSZ	Rung Sat Special Zone
SEAL	USN Special Forces
SEALORDS	Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, and Delta Strategy
SEAWOLF	UH-1B Helo, heavily armed, USN operated
TF	Task Force
USN	United States Navy
VC	Vietcong
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps

VNN	Vietnamese Navy
WBGP	Waterborne Guard Post
ZIPPO	Flame thrower equipped ATC or Monitor

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

During the Vietnam War the Mekong River Delta was a crucial battleground. Extending south and west from Saigon to the Gulf of Thailand and the Cambodian border, the delta is a rich rice producing area that was home to one-half of South Vietnam's population. Control of this area was essential if the war against the Vietcong (the name for communists in South Vietnam, acronym VC) and the North Vietnamese was going to succeed.

Crisscrossed by rivers and canals, the delta was an area where people and goods moved primarily by water. To provide security against communist forces and interdict communist supply shipments, control of these waterways was necessary. It was this situation that led the United States to establish a riverine (brown-water) naval force in South Vietnam. As part of the American military assistance to the South Vietnamese government, the United States Navy (USN) undertook the mission of winning back and holding this strategic region.

This paper examines Operation SEALORDS, the capstone campaign conducted by the brown-water Navy in Vietnam. Operation SEALORDS (Southeast Asia Lake Ocean River Delta Strategy) began on 5 November 1968 and lasted until 1 July 1970. The broad mission of SEALORDS was to interdict enemy supply lines of communication and to conduct offensive operations with the intent to regain control and pacify designated areas in the southern part of III Corps and all of IV Corps' Tactical Zone, an area that corresponded roughly to the delta.

SEALORDS represented the maturation of riverine warfare in Vietnam. By this time, riverine forces had evolved from a rather ad hoc, hastily put together force in early 1965, into an integrated fighting force.

This paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction and background. In order to correctly analyze SEALORDS, it is necessary to put the operation into some historical context. Chapter one examines some of the evolutionary changes in riverine warfare and addresses early measures taken to counter communist infiltration into what would become the SEALORDS area of operations (AOR). Chapter two examines the operational concept of SEALORDS as well as the Cambodian border interdiction campaign. This discussion shows what was different and significant about SEALORDS. Chapter three discusses various denial-of-sanctuary operations and pacification campaigns as they pertain to Operation SEALORDS. Chapter four examines the Accelerated Turnover Program to the Vietnamese (ACTOV), the U.S. Navy's Vietnamization plan. ACTOV was instituted concurrently with SEALORDS. The final chapter provides an analysis and conclusions.

Primary and Subordinate Research Questions

This study assesses qualitatively the effectiveness of the SEALORDS campaign by analyzing critical components of the operation. Specifically, this paper addresses the primary question: Was the SEALORDS campaign successful, and if so, what lessons can be learned from SEALORDS and how might the Navy employ brown-water forces in the future? In order to provide an answer to this question, three subordinate questions are addressed.

First, was the border interdiction portion of the campaign successful in affecting communist infiltration of arms, men, and material? Second, was the denial-of-sanctuary and pacification effort successful in regaining control of certain areas in the Mekong Delta and the

IV Corps Tactical Zone? Finally, was the ACTOV program effective in turning over in-country naval assets to the Vietnamese and making it possible for the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) to assume the entire security mission?

Significance of the Study

The Vietnam War has left an indelible imprint on the national psyche. It is the only war in the country's history in which the U.S. lost. There are differing arguments as to whether certain courses of actions would have led to a different outcome. There are other arguments that there was nothing the U.S. could have done to effect the outcome of this "people's war." Regardless of one's leanings, there is much to be learned from the study of the Vietnam War in the area's of international and domestic politics, military strategy, and tactics. This paper contains discussions of matters relating to these areas.

More specifically for students of naval strategy and naval warfare, the brown-water experience of the U.S. Navy in Vietnam is important. In 1992 the United States Navy announced a major shift in its strategic focus from operating on the sea toward power projection from the sea in the littoral regions of the world--"those areas adjacent to the oceans and seas that are within direct control of and vulnerable to the striking power of sea-based forces."[1] With this new direction, the value of revisiting the U.S. Navy's most recent brown-water (littoral) experience and identifying lessons learned is self-evident.

Finally, in an interview with the author, Vice Admiral Emmett H. Tidd, USN (Retired), a Vietnam Veteran, said it best, "We are rapidly running out of living members of that exclusive group of veterans who participated in these operations. That is why your research and accurate documentation for future generations is so important."[2] This study, with its integration of

personal interviews conducted by the thesis author, does add some new material to the historical record.

Methodology, Limitations, and Delimitations

In this study the author used a historical research method relying first on primary sources that were available. These included personal interviews, oral histories, and archival material. Secondary sources were used where necessary to fill in any gaps. Background information on each operation is provided as a framework from which to analyze strategic and tactical decisions. Observations are made about these decisions. Finally, conclusions are drawn from these observations.

This study was limited to unclassified sources. A further limitation is that the bulk of the archival material resides at the Naval Historical Center in Washington, DC. Due to its remote location and to curriculum requirements at the Command and General Staff College, the author was able to spend only one day sifting through this vast storehouse. The amount of Vietnam material far exceeds the limited staff's ability to categorize and organize the material, and as such, much more time would be required by the researcher in order to locate documents.

Delimitations to this study are related to the nature of the operations and to the current geopolitical situation with respect to Vietnam. Riverine operations during the SEALORDS campaign were often joint and combined. In seeking to determine the effectiveness of one branch of service, it must be remembered that success was often codependent with the actions and reactions of other parties and factors. Another delimitation is that there is little reliable information available from the former North Vietnamese. The author had attempted to obtain data regarding the effect of the SEALORDS operations from the former North Vietnamese

perspective. This data is difficult to obtain and has not been received at the time of this printing. This is, however, an area for future research.

Background

South Vietnam was a country of approximately 66,000 square miles located on the lower eastern extremity of the Southeast Asian peninsula. Lying below the Tropic of Cancer, the climate is hot and humid with a heavy annual rainfall.[3] As a peninsular country South Vietnam had over 1,435 miles of coastline along the shores of the South China Sea.[4]

One of the three major regions of South Vietnam was the Mekong Delta (fig. 1). The Mekong Delta is a flat alluvial plain that made up about one-fourth of the country's total land area and was considered the rice bowl of Southeast Asia. Given its agricultural productivity and large population, it was imperative that the South Vietnamese maintain control in this vital region. South Vietnamese control was weak and sporadic during the period preceding expanded U.S. involvement in South Vietnam. The primary threat to the region came from the Vietcong forces. The Vietcong conducted a violent campaign of armed insurgency. Their primary targets were strategic hamlets located in the delta. In order to conduct their insurgency, the Vietcong required resupply from North Vietnam of both men and material.

The need for, and development of a riverine force, gradually grew from a desire to halt this enemy infiltration of men and materiel into South Vietnam as well as to assist in pacification efforts in those areas best accessible by boats. There was considerable debate has to how and where the enemy infiltration was occurring. One argument was that it was coming overland through Laos and Cambodia. The other was that it was predominantly seaborne. The third argument was that it was some combination of the two.[5]

In 1964, a study of the infiltration problem was conducted by Captain Phil Bucklew, a Navy SEAL with a tremendous amount of experience dating back to World War II. His exhaustive study concluded that the Vietcong were infiltrated over the land routes primarily, but that some seaborne infiltration was also occurring. He also pointed to the use of the extensive inland waterways as a means of transhipment of men and materiel.[6] The study was also critical of the VNN's coastal patrol efforts. It was these findings and events that occurred in early 1965 that would lead to the establishment of Market Time, the U.S. Navy's joint and combined coastal patrol effort.

Market Time

On 16 February 1965 a U.S. Army helicopter pilot sighted a camouflaged ship off the central coast of South Vietnam in Vung Ro Bay. South Vietnamese Skyraiders were vectored to the bay where they eventually capsized and sunk the enemy ship. While the South Vietnamese experienced several delays in overcoming Vietcong resistance in the area of the downed ship, when they actually did get ashore they discovered 100 tons of Russian and Chinese-made weapons, ammunition, explosives, and medical supplies. Divers also retrieved valuable intelligence from papers found on the sunken vessel.[7]

The discovery of the enemy ship and contraband made a significant impression on the senior Naval and Army leadership. This was the first verifiable instance of sea infiltration. General Westmoreland pushed for an aggressive antiinfiltration patrol to be conducted with the South Vietnamese. The senior Naval leadership agreed and Operation Market Time was born.[8]

The Market Time mission was "to conduct surveillance, gunfire support, visit and search, and other operations as directed along the coast of the Republic of Vietnam in order to assist the Republic of Vietnam in detection and prevention of Communist infiltration from the

sea." A secondary mission was to "improve the Vietnamese Navy's counterinsurgency capabilities and assist Vietnamese and U.S. forces to secure the coastal regions and major rivers in order to defeat the Communist insurgency in Vietnam."[9]

The coastal surveillance operation was organized around eight (later nine) patrol sectors covering the 1,200-mile South Vietnamese coast from the 17th parallel to the Cambodian border and extending forty miles out to sea. Within these areas, surface search was conducted by ships and craft of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the VNN.[10] An outer barrier was patrolled by U.S. Navy P-3 aircraft operating from bases in South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Market Time forces were originally under the operational control of the Seventh Fleet, "but on 30 April 1965 Secretary of Defense McNamara approved the transfer of control to the Chief of the Naval Advisory Group (CHNAVADVGRU) as Commander Task Force 115 (designated as the Coastal Surveillance Force) to take place on 31 July."[11] At approximately this same time, the first Navy flag officer assigned to duty in Vietnam, Rear Admiral Ward, was to take the helm at CHNAVADVGRU.[12] In this way, in mid-1965 the U.S. Navy undertook an operational role in Vietnam, where before they had, had only an advisory role.

Once Market Time operations were underway, it was evident that there would be a need for more and better shallow water patrol capabilities. The answer would come in the form of the Water Patrol Boat (WPBs), which was an eighty-two-foot Coast Guard cutter, and U.S. Navy Patrol Craft, Fast (PCFs), commonly referred to as "Swift Boats." As these were the primary patrol craft used during Market Time, a brief description of each is appropriate.

The WPB was designed for coastal search and rescue operations. It was diesel propelled and was capable of operating at eighteen knots. It had a steelhull and an aluminum superstructure. Armament included one .50-caliber machine gun and one 81-millimeter mortar

forward, and four .50-caliber machine guns aft. Market Time forces were to receive 26 WPBs, the first of which arrived in July 1965.[13]

The Swift Boat was a civilian transport craft used to ferry workers to and from offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. The Swift had an aluminum hull and was fifty feet in length. These shallow draft, diesel propelled craft could attain speeds in excess of twenty-five knots. The Swift mounted a twin .50-caliber machine gun forward, a single .50-caliber and an eighty-one-millimeter mortar aft.[14] The first Swifts arrived in October of 1965 and by war's end the Vietnamese would receive over one hundred of these craft.

The Market Time patrol quickly grew in both resources and sophistication. Island-based radars as well as additional patrol boats and Coast Guard cutters were added to Task Force 115 assets. Operating procedures incorporated mutual support from air, naval, and ground units. Initial results from Market Time were promising. In addition to preventing several enemy trawlers from infiltrating arms, many smaller craft (junks and sampans) were diverted or destroyed as well.[15] However, as the coastal patrol forces became increasingly more effective, Market Time business began to fall off.

After the midpart of 1967 enemy seaborne infiltration attempts appeared to slow considerably. No significant detections or seizures of enemy contraband were being recorded. Aside from a crisis-related gamble at TET, by 1968 the North Vietnamese had apparently been deterred from using seaborne infiltration as a major means of supply.[16] By this time the Ho Chi Minh trail had become a well-established supply complex for enemy forces fighting in the northern sectors of South Vietnam. Additionally, in 1967, the Communists began using the port of Sihanouk, Cambodia, as a secure transhipment point for munitions destined for the Mekong Delta.[17]

In assessing the effectiveness of Market Time, impressive statistics exist regarding the quantities of vessels detected and searched. However, the statistics do not address those craft that went undetected. This data would only be available from the communist side, if at all. The data does suggest, however, that seaborne infiltration was reduced as a result of Market Time and that the enemy had to devise costly work-arounds. General Westmoreland states in his memoirs that, "One of the basic reasons the enemy turned to Sihanoukville and Cambodia as his primary source of supplies for his forces in at least the southern half of South Vietnam was a project known as Market Time."[18]

Now that Market Time had been at least partially effective in countering seaborne infiltration the problem remained as to how to stop infiltration in the inland waterways. The solution for gaining control of the major rivers and the vast network of internal waterways in South Vietnam would lead to the establishment of a riverine force. The operation that would come to define this riverine force was called Game Warden.

Game Warden

The impetus for the creation of a river patrol force was the inability of the South Vietnamese to secure the strategically vital areas of the Mekong Delta and the Rung Sat Special Zone. The Rung Sat Special Zone contained the major shipping lanes into Saigon. The Vietcong were well entrenched in sanctuaries located in these areas. The mission of the Game Warden forces was to "conduct river patrols and inshore surveillance to enforce curfews and to prevent Vietcong infiltration, movement, and resupply along the delta estuary coast and across the major rivers."[19]

Game Warden operations began in early 1966. A new river patrol force was established as Task Force 116. Task Force 116 was organized around the river patrol boat (or PBR) as it

was more commonly called. Task Force 116 initially consisted of one hundred PBRs, twenty Landing Craft, Personnel, Large (LCPL), a Landing Ship Tank (LST) as a support ship, and eight UH-1B helicopters.[20] The LST served a dual role. First, it could transport the PBRs to the intended patrol area, and second, it would serve as a floating base once the PBR was off-loaded.

The PBR was the workhorse of Task Force 116. A civilian pleasure craft, it was adapted for military use. The PBR had a fiberglass hull and was thirty-one feet in length. Its two diesel engines drove high speed Jacuzzi jet pumps. The jet pumps gave the boat the advantage of having neither rudders nor screws. (It was steered by altering the direction of the jet nozzles.) This made the craft ideal for shallow water operations, and the boat was both responsive and highly maneuverable.[21] Depending on the version, the boat had a speed of twenty-five to twenty-nine knots.

The PBR mounted twin .50-caliber machines guns forward, side mounted M-60 machine guns or a 40-millimeter grenade launcher, and a .30-caliber machine gun aft. It had a Pathfinder surface search radar and two radios. The PBR was crewed by four enlisted men.

Another crucial player in Game Warden operations was the UH-1B helicopter. The "Seawolves," as these helicopters became known, brought to the table a quick reaction capability, increased firepower, and aerial reconnaissance. The UH-1B was armed with rockets, various machine guns, and small arms. When added to the River Patrol Force they quickly became a force multiplier.

Game Warden became an important step in the evolutionary development of riverine warfare. There was no official doctrine to support these operations and often the ingenious sailors had to make it up as they went along. As they developed tactics to deal with the threat, the enemy often devised dangerous countertactics. Operational forces were able to see how these tactics and their boats would perform in a combat environment. It was here that the night

PBR patrols and early ambush tactics were first employed. Additionally, this operation saw the first use of helicopters in a support role as protection for the vulnerable PBRs.

Game Warden forces compiled impressive statistics throughout the duration of the operation. In 1967 Game Warden sailors boarded over 400,000 vessels for inspection. "In the process, the River Patrol Force destroyed, damaged, or captured over 2,000 Vietcong craft and killed, wounded, or captured over 1,400 of the enemy. The U.S. Navy suffered the loss of 39 officers and men killed, 366 wounded, and 9 missing in battle."[22]

However, several problems limited the effectiveness of river Patrol Force operations from 1966 to early 1968. Dr. Edward Marolda, senior historian at the Naval Historical Center best explains:

> Because only about 150 PBRs were deployed to south Vietnam, they could patrol only the large Mekong Delta rivers. And aside from the support of the Navy's helicopter squadron (the Seawolves), U.S. and Vietnamese resources were not coordinated to interdict Viet Cong traffic on the inland waterways. Hence, allied ground and air commands, naval combat units, police forces, and local government organizations often conducted their activities in virtual isolation from one another. The enemy eventually adapted to the river patrol operation by shifting many logistics routes to the lesser rivers, canals, and swampy areas of the Delta. The PBR units rarely left the major branches of the Mekong. In addition, the Viet Cong learned to evade waterway patrols and skirt police checkpoints.[23]

Mobile Riverine Force

In early 1966 it became clear to the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), that a U.S. ground presence was needed in the Mekong Delta to counter communist insurgent operations and regain control of this strategically vital region. The problem he faced was how to introduce these troops into the delta. Given the shortage of suitable high ground and the desire not to displace any civilian personnel because of the political ramifications, the establishment of a large land base was determined unworkable.[24]

In order to solve this problem, the establishment of a mobile riverine force (MRF) was conceived. A reinforced infantry brigade supported by an artillery battalion was based afloat on the major rivers in U.S. Navy ships. "This strike force would project its power up to 50 kilometers from the mobile base by the use of assault craft. . . . In addition the base would have the capability of moving on short notice to a number of locations along the major waterways of the Delta."[25] Conceived as a joint operation, the naval component of the MRF was tasked with troop transport and gunfire support while the Army conducted ground sweeps. The Army element of the MRF was the 2nd Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division (later augmented by the 3rd brigade).[26]

Commanding the naval component in this operation was COMNAVFORV under the operational hat of Commander Riverine Assault Force (Task Force 117). Task Force 117's primary mission as stated in CTF 117, Operation Order 201-YR, was to "conduct riverine assault operations in the Mekong Delta to destroy Vietcong main and local force units and their resources in order to assist the Government of the Republic of Vietnam in extending control of waterway systems and contiguous land areas."[27] This mission would come to be known popularly by the term search-and-destroy.

Task Force 117 was initially organized into two River Assault Squadrons composed of approximately 400 personnel. These squadrons were further subdivided into two river divisions. Each squadron fielded three command and control boats (CCBs), five monitors which were converted for river usage as "miniature battleships" designed to provide fire support, thirteen armored troop carriers (ATCs), and eight assault support patrol boats (ASPBs).

In order to provide mobility from which to launch the striking forces, a mobile riverine base was established. Comprised of barracks ships, berthing barges, and a specially configured repair ship, the base was capable of weighing anchor and moving, to retain some element of

surprise and to keep the enemy on the run. Additionally, Army Engineers and Navy Seabees constructed an artificial island base called "Dong Tam" by dredging and filling an area in the vicinity of My Tho.

Operations of the MRF were conducted in four phases, stated in the Operation Order 117 as follows:

> a. PHASE I. The Mobile Riverine Force deployed to the Mobile Riverine Base area from which assault operations were to be launched. The movement of the Mobile Riverine Force to the Mobile Riverine Base through the major rivers of the Mekong Delta was accomplished with security provided by Riverine Assault Squadron craft. Effective mine counter measures were carried out in advance of the force.
>
> b. PHASE II. From the Mobile Riverine Base, ground and naval combat elements deployed to the area of operations in Riverine Assault Squadron craft, overland, by helicopters or by any combination of these means. Riverine Assault Force units were positioned or employed as required to provide maximum combat and logistical support of the ground operations.
>
> c. PHASE III. Operations to destroy enemy forces and resources were conducted. These operations included coordination with RVNAF, GVN and other U.S. agencies to insure furtherance of the Revolutionary Development Program in conjunction with and subsequent to military operations.
>
> d. PHASE IV. Combat units withdrew and redeployed to the Mobile Riverine Base or another area of operations.[28]

In his memoirs General Westmoreland writes on the initial success of the MRF:

> In the first year, 1967, the Riverine Force engaged in five major actions and destroyed over a thousand VC. As operations began, ambushes from the shore with the enemy using rockets and recoilless rifles were common, and the enemy was often encountered in battalion strength. As time passed, a sharp decrease in the number of ambushes and the size of the enemy forces attested to the success achieved. Sections of the Delta long given over to the VC were by the end of 1968 readily accessible.[29]

In assessing the effectiveness of this force, there is little question that the MRF performed a dangerous and heroic mission. MRF actions during the 1968 TET Offensive were the key to allied military success in the delta and earned the force the Presidential Unit Citation.[30] Technical innovations proved beneficial to subsequent riverine operations.

Additionally, the wealth of operational and tactical knowledge gained was invaluable to future operations. However, some historians have had considerable reservations about the soundness of the overall strategy. R. L. Schreadley in his book From the Rivers to the Sea on the Vietnam War writes:

> What the MRF lacked, what the strategy of search-and-destroy lacked, was the clear means to discriminate between friend and foe. As many have remarked, the innocent peasant working in the field and the Viet Cong with a grenade clutched to his breast looked remarkably alike. If it was difficult to conduct an interdiction campaign in South Vietnam without causing severe disruption to the civilian economy, it was next to impossible to engage in search-and-destroy operations in the populous Delta without inflicting grave damage on those whose "hearts and minds" were the great prize in the war.[31]

The crux of the problem remained one of countering the enemy's infiltration efforts. In his final report to the Senate, in January 1968, Defense Secretary McNamara said, "It is difficult to conceive of any interdiction campaign that would effectively stop the flow of men and supplies to the south."[32] The TET Offensive of 1968 demonstrated that the Vietcong remained able to infiltrate enough men and material to sustain major combat operations. By the spring of 1968, the enemy was infiltrating supplies over the Cambodian border with impunity.[33]

It was time for a new and bold strategy. As fortune would have it, Vice Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., had just received orders to relieve Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, as Commander Naval Forces Vietnam. Vice Admiral Zumwalt, who would later go on to become the youngest Chief of Naval Operations in history, had some very definite ideas as to what this strategy should be. Arguably one of the best, if not the best, strategists to come out of the war, his legacy in Vietnam would be an operation code-named SEALORDS. SEALORDS would seek to integrate the three task forces (TFs 115, 116, and 117) mentioned in the preceding pages in an innovative new approach to solving the infiltration problem.

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[1]Department of the Navy, Forward...From The Sea (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Navy, April 1995) cover letter.

[2]Vice Admiral Emmett H. Tidd, US Navy (Ret.), telephone interview by author, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 12 April 1997,

[3]Harry G. Summers, Vietnam War Almanac (New York, NY: Facts On File Publications, 1985), 3.

[4]R. L. Schreadley, From the Rivers to the Sea (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1992), 2.

[5]Thomas J. Cutler, Brown Water, Black Berets (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 72.

[6]Cutler, 74.

[7]Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1986), 514.

[8]Ibid., 514.

[9]Chief, Naval Advisory Group Vietnam letter serial 00100-65, 25 August 1965.

[10]Edward J. Marolda and Wesley G. Pryce, A Short History of the United States Navy and the Southeast Asian Conflict 1950-1975 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1984), 44-45.

[11]Cutler, 81.

[12]Schreadley, 87.

[13]Ibid., 86.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Edward J. Marolda, By Sea, Air and Land: An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1994), 149.

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[17]Ibid.

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[19]Lionel Krisel, A Review of U.S. Navy Experience in Establishment and Conduct of Mekong Delta River Patrol: Operation Game Warden (Washington, DC: Naval Research Laboratory, May 1969), 5.

[20]Schreadley, 90.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Marolda, By Sea, Air and Land, 186.

[23]Edward J. Marolda, "The War in Vietnam's Shallows," Naval History (April 1987): 12-19.

[24]Commander Task Force 117, Operation Order (CTF 117 OPORD No. 201-YR) (USS BENEWAH, Flagship, Message Ref: 150001H May 68), 6.

[25]Ibid., 6.

[26]Marolda, By Sea, Air and Land , 204.

[27]CTF 117 OPORD, 7.

[28]CTF-117 OPORD, A-1, A-2.

[29]Westmoreland, 209.

[30]Marolda, By Sea, Air and Land, 210.

[31]Schreadley, 103.

[32]Jon M. Van Dyke, North Vietnam's Strategy For Survival (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, Publishers, 1972), 34.

[33]Department of the Navy, Operations Evaluation Group, "Game Warden" (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 1976), 4.

CHAPTER II

SEALORDS: OPERATIONAL CONCEPT AND PHASE ONE--BARRIER INTERDICTION

The communist TET Offensive of early 1968 inflicted heavy losses on South Vietnamese and U.S. Forces, but communist losses were much greater. Within a matter of weeks the South Vietnamese government had reestablished its pre-TET positions and was moving to extend control into new areas. In Washington, DC, however, President Johnson and his administration did not recover from the psychological blow of TET. President Johnson soon announced that he would not seek reelection and his new Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, began working diligently to reduce America's role in the war. It was in this atmosphere that Vice Admiral Zumwalt arrived in Vietnam.

Taking up his assignment as Commander, Naval Forces Vietnam, Zumwalt sought a way to have the in-country U.S. Navy Forces in Vietnam prosecute the war more effectively. When he arrived in theater, Naval Forces Vietnam was numerically at its peak. Over 38,000 sailors were assigned, in addition to numerous vessels, small craft, and aviation assets. Despite their numbers, however, it was the impression of the Commander Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMMACV), General Creighton Abrams, that the Navy in-country forces were underemployed.[1] Zumwalt soon changed this perception with Operation SEALORDS.

At the same time, because of his familiarity with the thinking within the administration in Washington, Zumwalt also began to implement a naval Vietnamization program known as

ACTOV. SEALORDS and ACTOV were carried out simultaneously in what Zumwalt sensed was a race against time.

Zumwalt arrived in Vietnam in late September 1968 on the eve of the presidential election. In Washington he had served as the Navy's first Director of Systems Analysis and had become acutely aware of the financial drain that the cost of the Vietnam War was having on the conventional Navy while the Soviet Union was building up its navy at an unprecedented level. In this position he had developed a close-working relationship with Paul Nitze, then Secretary of the Navy, and later Deputy Secretary of Defense. Through this relationship Zumwalt was keyed into what was happening at the White House and of the effect that the growing lack of public support for the War was having. These thoughts were on his mind as he took the helm in Vietnam. As he recalls,

> First, when I got there, I said to my guys--Humphrey was running against Nixon at the time I arrived, in September of 1968. I said if Mr. Humphrey is elected we are going to have a year. If Mr. Nixon is elected we will probably have three years to get the Vietnamization done. Therefore, we must have a one-year plan that we can stretch out and make more feasible if Mr. Nixon is elected. We put that together and the thing I kept emphasizing was that the Vietnamese had to be behind it and believe in it. . . . Those days, because of the very Machiavellian way in which McNamara ran things, I was getting dope from Nitze that Moorer (then CNO) sometimes wasn't getting. But as a result of that I probably had as good a view of just how unstable our domestic situation was as anyone in uniform did when I went out there (Vietnam). It was therefore my own personal conviction that with Humphrey we had a year and with Nixon we had three--and that's just about the way it worked out.[2]

Knowing that time was of the essence, Zumwalt hit the ground running. Captain Howard Kerr, Jr., Zumwalt's aide at the time, remembers that just as the door of the plane opened at Tan Son Nhut field, Admiral Zumwalt turned to him and said, "Well, Howard, this is day one. Let's get on with it."[3] During his turnover process Zumwalt was able to conduct a quick look around the Mekong Delta, visiting the various naval facilities which would be under his command. He very quickly sized up the operational situation and determined that the original missions for which the forces had been created had been completed. That is, no more trawlers

were coming in along the coast where the Swifts were still deployed, and no more traffic was coming down the major rivers where the PBRs were deployed.[4]

Why Zumwalt's predecessor had failed to come to this conclusion is unknown. Indications were that the staff in Saigon was out of touch with the forces in the field, relying heavily on message traffic and telephone calls. Kerr described the staff as a large, sleepy, moribund group that had fallen into a static pattern. They read the message traffic, pulled out messages that they considered important, and briefed them to the admiral in the morning, giving him a panapoly of statistics, such as the number of boats that had been searched on the rivers, but failing to see what the relevance of all this was to the overall war effort.[5]

At the same time intelligence reports were clearly indicating that the communists were infiltrating arms and munitions across the Cambodian border into South Vietnam using the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia (fig. 2). Zumwalt's Intelligence Officer, Captain Rex Rectanus, who later was to become a three-star vice admiral, was the first to conclude this, having infiltrated the Cambodian intelligence network in a clandestine operation entitled "Sunshine Park."[6] Rectanus, using human intelligence, had beaten the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to this conclusion. The CIA was concerned with verifying the bona fides of Rectanus's sources. Rectanus's method was, instead, to work empirically. That is, did the information seem to be true.[7]

It was with these conditions in mind that Zumwalt set about devising the new, bold strategy which was to become SEALORDS. Zumwalt recalls:

> Then as you look at the map, as I was studying it one day, it dawned on me that there was water all the way along the Cambodian border from the Gulf of Thailand by way of the Vinh Te Canal across to the major rivers and then across the Plain of Reeds there was a canal and the two rivers on either side of the Parrots Beak made it possible along several hundred kilometers--to install a blockade. It seemed so obvious to me that I didn't trust my own judgement as a newcomer so I flew down to meet with Captain Bob Salzer who was, in my judgement, the bravest and boldest of the warriors we had out there in command and who

had been there for two years. He said the concept was breathtaking but he thought it could be made to work.[8]

Returning to Saigon, Zumwalt wasted no time in calling a staff meeting together comprised of the principal players to iron out the concept of operations for SEALORDS. SEALORDS was officially promulgated on 5 November with the issuance of Operation Plan (OPLAN) 111-69. The broad objectives of SEALORDS, as stated in OPLAN 111-69, were to interdict the enemy's communications-liaison routes, destroy his base areas, open waterways to friendly commerce and pacify certain areas.[9] To achieve these objectives, major operations in the following three categories were conducted: (1) interdiction operations, (2) harassment/denial of sanctuary operations, and (3) pacification.

At the heart of SEALORDS was a new task organization. Designated Task Force 194, this new task force in effect combined elements of the three major task forces in country. As introduced in chapter one, these were Task Force 115, which provided coastal surveillance, Task Force 116 which patrolled the major rivers, and Task Force 117, the Mobile Riverine Force, tasked with supporting the 9th Infantry Division on search and destroy missions. The old idea of largely independent employment of the three major task forces had given way to the concept of a brown-water task fleet in which the heavy, armored craft of TF-117 played the role of battleships, and the lighter and faster PCFs and PBRs performed as cruisers and destroyers.[10]

Admiral Zumwalt, as COMNAVFORV, was designated Commander Task Force 194. His deputy ran the day-to-day operations and had OPCON of those portions of the three task forces which were participating in SEALORDS operations.[11] The deputy's official title was First Sea Lord (FSL), a word play on the traditional British naval secretary. Captain Bob Salzer, Commander of Task Force 117, was designated as the FSL and can be credited with putting much of the initial campaign together.

Besides the integration of the three separate task forces another novel concept contained in the SEALORDS OPLAN was the joint employment of Army and Naval assets including aviation assets to a degree that had heretofore not been realized. These assets included UH-1B Helicopters of the HAL-3 "Seawolf" squadron, OV-10 Bronco fixed-wing aircraft of Light Attack Squadron 4 (VAL-4) and SEALs. In addition, the concept entailed utilizing Vietnamese Forces (both navy and marine) to a greater degree. Commander R. L. Schreadley in his book From the Rivers to the Sea states:

> SEALORDS called for the cooperation and mutual support of sea, air, and ground forces. If it was desirable to combine the best features of the three naval task forces, it was essential that adequate air and ground forces be committed to ensure both the initial and the long-term success of SEALORDS. A major criticism of the conduct of the war to that time had been the repeated failure to establish and maintain a friendly presence in the wake of search-and-destroy operations. Once the smoke cleared from such operations, the enemy almost always was given free rein to return and wreak vengeance on those in the civilian population who had failed to support him.[12]

Interdiction Operations

Four main inderdiction operations formed the linchpin of the SEALORDS campaign. Once instituted, these operations created a barrier athwart enemy infiltration routes from the Gulf of Thailand to an area Northeast of the Cambodian "Parrot's Beak" region.[13] In essence, SEALORDS had created a front by projecting sea power deep into the heart of the Mekong Delta. This is the meaning of this study's title " SEALORDS: A Front in a Frontless War." The four major interdiction operations were, in chronological order: (1) Operation Search Turn (November 1968); (2) Operation Tran Hung Dao (November 1968); (3) Operation Giant Slingshot (December 1968); and (4) Operation Barrier Reef (January 1969).

Operation Search Turn

Having come up with his barrier interdiction theory, Zumwalt decided to first test his theory by establishing "Search Turn" an operation that was located "in the middle of the lower part of the Delta where we knew we could always get reinforcements in one way or another because it was so close to our source of reinforcements."[14] The objective was to establish an interdiction barrier from Rach Gia, on the Gulf of Siam, to Long Xuyen, on the Bassac River. Two almost parallel canals, the Rach Gia di Long and the Cai San, approximately forty miles from the Cambodian border, comprised the area of operations (fig. 3).

Captain Salzer, Zumwalt's deputy and First Sea Lord (FSL) explains the impetus for selecting this area of operations for the start of the campaign:

> The supplies were coming into what used to be called Sihanoukville and coming down the Gulf of Siam coast about 10-20 miles inland through a canal network. We had a foothold in the town of Rach Gia and no control above that at all. What I wanted to do was to make a probe or a strike down the canal network that led to Rach Gia initially. We had a base down there but it was very difficult to re-supply. What I wanted to do was to establish a series of outposts along that river canal network first, then spread it up to the north. At the same time I wanted to establish patrols, not on a "string of pearls" basis as they had been before.[15]

The Rach Gia-Long Xuyen corridor was purported to cut directly across the principal supply route used in infiltrating arms and munitions from Cambodia to Vietcong Military Region III. The OPLAN listed the Rach Gia-Long Xuyen corridor as a priority one target. The enemy order of battle estimated the total enemy strength to be approximately 700. These consisted of the U-Minh 10 battalion, four company-sized District Consolidated Units (DCU) and one Regional Force Company.[16]

Search Turn officially got underway on 2 November 1968, launched by the armored boats of Task Force 117. Five days of intense fighting ensued. After initially opening up the canal, the heavier craft were relieved and/or augmented by the PBRs of Task Force 116, which were then able to actively patrol the canals. PCFs from Task Force 115 were used to patrol the

Gulf of Thailand around the entrance to the canals.[17] The joint employment of the task forces is readily illustrated here.

Vietnamese Marine Corps troops who had been operating with the armored craft of TF 117 were able to move into what was called the Three Sisters area in the western part of the delta while the regional force troops took over the bank security of the canals.[18] During this period sizable quantities of arms and ammunition were captured and twenty-one Vietcong were killed, thus validating the effectiveness of interdicting by setting up a barrier and giving Zumwalt a green light to expand on his concept.[19]

The Search Turn area of operations would continue to provide an important interdiction barrier throughout the SEALORDS campaign. Though not as heavily contested as Operations Tran Hung Dao and Giant Slingshot due to their strategic location, Search Turn still averaged over twenty enemy KIAs (killed in action) per month and would result in the seizure of over fourteen tons of arms and ammunition by the end of the Campaign.[20] The following incident illustrates typical night patrol activity in the Search Turn area of operations:

> On 06 September 1969, two PBRs of RIVDIV 553 supporting 21st ARVN Division operations sighted and took under fire three swimmers crossing from east to west on the Luynh Quynh Canal 18 miles northwest of Rach Gia. Seawolves were diverted from their patrol and placed air strikes while the PBRs provided illumination. The PBRs and Seawolves both received return fire from the banks and suppressed same. As the Seawolves departed station, Black Ponies arrived and placed additional air strikes. A troop sweep at daylight turned up four VC bodies, a small amount of clothing, and some freshly used medical dressings. There were no friendly casualties.[21]

Although the initial success of Search Turn convinced Zumwalt that the idea of barrier interdiction could be made to work, it was the precipitate actions of one of his Swift Boat captains that led him to choose where to implement the next barrier patrol. The boat captain was a young lieutenant junior grade by the name of Bernique. The operation would be called Tran Hung Dao and would be centered on the Rach Giang Thanh River.

Operation Tran Hung Dao

On 14 October 1968 while Lieutenant Junior Grade Bernique was on rest and relaxation in Ha Tien near the Cambodian border on the Gulf of Thailand, he became aware of a Vietcong tax collector operating a few miles up the Rach Giang Thang. The river was off-limits to U.S. Navy patrol craft due to its proximity to the politically sensitive Cambodian border. Regardless, Bernique proceeded to investigate and very quickly found himself in a fierce firefight. The surprised Vietcong were quickly overwhelmed and left behind weapons, ammunition, supplies, and documents which were confiscated.[22]

This action evoked a strong protest from Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia. Cambodia, a neutral country (albeit nominally) had claimed that innocent civilians had been attacked. This promoted Zumwalt to conduct an immediate investigation. Howard Kerr, Zumwalt's aide recalls,

> I remember the lieutenant when he got called up to Saigon for an interview that same day to find out what the hell he had done. He was told that Sihanouk had accused him of firing into Cambodia and killing innocent civilians. And this kid, with much aplomb and not the least bit of hesitation or deference, turned to whoever it was that mentioned that to him and said, "Well, you tell Sihanouk he's a lying son-of-a-bitch." That's basically what the State Department did, but they did it in the usual diplomatic language.[23]

Rather than punish Bernique, Admiral Zumwalt instead awarded him the Silver Star. The Admiral felt that this was "the kind of captain we need more of."[24] Zumwalt looked upon this as taking the initiative and not a violation of regulations. It sparked the thinking that led eventually to this second barrier operation, something to the effect of, "Well, if Lieutenant Bernique can do it, why can't the rest of us."[25] As kind of an inside joke, the Rach Giang Thanh River began to be referred to as "Bernique's Creek" among U.S. Navy personnel.

On 16 November Zumwalt ordered a patrol of the Rach Giang Thanh and adjoining Vinh Te Canal in order to test the feasibility of establishing a permanent barrier. Within five days of its commencement strong enemy reaction indicated that at least two platoon-sized elements had been thwarted in their attempted crossings. This provided Zumwalt the justification he needed and the Tran Hung Dao operation was officially sanctioned on 21 November 1968.[26]

The area of operations can be described as including the Rach Giang Thang River from Ha Tien on the Gulf of Thailand to where it adjoins the Vinh Te Canal and then eastward to the intersection with the Bassac River. The Vinh Te Canal and the Rach Giang Thanh both parallel the Cambodian border as close to within two kilometers (fig. 3). The Vinh Te Canal is a relatively straight waterway sixty-five kilometers in length and averaging about thirty-five meters wide. The canal is navigable to PBRs throughout the year except for a short period, approximately mid-April to early June, at the end of the dry season. The Rach Giang Thanh is about one hundred meters wide and remains navigable to PBRs year round.[27]

The Tran Hung Dao barrier quickly became an important link in the border interdiction campaign. In terms of enemy contact it became the second most active barrier of the four established as part of the SEALORDS campaign.[28] Many of the successful tactics used during the SEALORDS campaign were developed and employed here during the early days of the operation. Additionally, the flexibility and integration of the separate task forces which were to be the hallmark of the SEALORDS campaign was fully exercised. For example:

> Near the end of the month [July 1969], there were increased intelligence reports that the enemy was enlarging his efforts to infiltrate men, munitions, and supplies across the Vinh Te Canal into the Seven Mountains region. Reacting to these reports, the USS HUNTERDON COUNTY (LST 836) TU 116.3 with the PBR River Division 591 (TU 116.3) embarked changed operation control on 24 July to CTG 194.4 the Barrier Commander, stationed aboard the YRBM 16 moored near Chau Doc on the upper Bassac River and became TU 194.4.9 and 194.4.6 respectively. River Division 591 was assigned to carry out patrols on the Tri Ton and Vinh Te Canals, and River Division 515, which was assigned operations in Barrier Reef, augmented the Vinh Te Canal patrols. One TF 117 monitor was assigned to supplement the USN and VNN forces along the Rach Giang Thanh.[29]

Some of the new tactics developed were environment driven. Falling water levels in the Vinh Te Canal, for instance precluded small boat operations on several occasions. In these instances ground forces, including SEALS, were the primary means of interdiction along the

unnavigable portions of the canal. Electronic sensors were also employed as a means of detection and were added to the SEALORD'S tool bag. Air interdiction rounded out the effort.

Low water levels also curtailed a very successful tactic used during the SEALORDS campaign. The Waterborne Guard Post (WBGP) had been devised as a means of making the enemy come to PBRs. Essentially it was an ambush tactic whereby the PBRs would settle into a concealed position along a riverbank and cut their engines. Thus positioned they would await enemy infiltration attempts rather than noisily patrolling the rivers. These tactics proved very successful and were likened to using the enemy's own tactics against him. During low water levels, however, the higher banks made the PBRs more vulnerable to counterattack. It should be noted, however, that the low water levels were the exception rather than the rule.

Several measures of effectiveness indicated the initial successes of Tran Hung Dao. Among these were included increased mining attempts, fire fights, ambushes, and captured contraband. Another degree of effectiveness is reflected in a statement by a VC who had surrendered in early 1970. He revealed that a three-hundred-man unit with needed weapons and supplies had been prevented from crossing into the Seven Mountains area for several weeks by Navy forces. This prompted recognition from Major General Wetherill, CG DMAC, who passed to the units concerned a message which contained a well done for their unsurpassed "Courage, determination, and aggressive action."[30]

Moving in rapid-fire succession, Operation Tran Hung Dao had barely kicked off when Zumwalt instituted the most successful, violent, and unremitting interdiction barrier of all--Operation Giant Slingshot.

Operation Giant Slingshot

> As I say, that same inchoate feeling overtook me as I made my initial tour and then as I got back to Saigon and looked at the map-there it was, just big as hell--Giant Slingshot staring me in the face.[31]

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., USN, (Retired)

The Giant Slingshot Operation was centered on the strategically significant Parrot's Beak region of Vietnam. This region's name is due to the fact that a part of Cambodia that juts into Vietnam as close to twenty-five miles from Saigon looks on a map like a parrot's head and beak. Because of its location, this area was an ideal communist infiltration route. Two converging rivers run on either side of the Parrot's Beak to a confluence southwest of Saigon. These are the Vam Co Tay, which runs west of the Parrot's Beak, and the Vam Co Dong to the east. These rivers form a large "V" surrounding the Parrot's Beak and hence the name Giant Slingshot (fig. 3). Both rivers are navigable to PBRs year around.

At the time of the Giant Slingshot's inception these rivers were almost entirely under enemy control. Explaining the initial impetuous for Slingshot, the commander of the operation, Rear Admiral Arthur W. Price, Jr., USN (Retired), then a captain, recalls:

> On one of the sweeps of the river banks by an army battalion they discovered many 50-gallon oil drums filled with ammunition buried in a river bank. It was assumed that this was the way the enemy stashed their ammunition when they had the Tet offensive in 1968. Possibly, this was also the way they were going to do it for a forthcoming TET '69 offensive. We didn't know but anyway we knew it was there, how much was there we had to find out, and that was my task, to run this operation and clear out this river and find out what was on the banks.[32]

In setting up the initial operation Price was able to release forty PBRs from Task Force 116. He also asked for and received VNN participation in the way of twenty additional boats and a liaison officer. The main operating base was located at Tan An near the confluence of the two rivers. This created logistical problems because patrol areas extended some fifty miles from

the base camp. The solution came in the form of floating bases which would become known as Advanced Tactical Support Bases (ATSBs).[33]

ATSBs were established by towing thirty-by-ninety-foot ammipontoon barges to places on the rivers that afforded some natural protection and then anchoring them. As the operation progressed, the ATSBs became more sophisticated. A typical Giant Slingshot ATSB is described as consisting of an acre or less of high ground and three or more barges, on which were placed berthing and messing facilities, storerooms, a magazine, a tactical operations center (TOC), a communications van, a helicopter landing pad, and a machinery room containing generators and other assorted equipment.[34]

An ATSB could support a ten-boat, sixty-five-man PBR division, as well as troop transports and river assault craft, such as the monitor. These bases were progressively established on each of the two rivers until the entire Parrot's Beak region was within operating distance of either a floating base or a shore facility.[35]

Providing security for these bases was a major challenge. One threat that the sailors had to contend with was the swimmer or underwater sapper attack. The solution to this problem was depth charges dropped over the side to discourage swimmers. Events at an ATSB located at Go Dau Ha on the Vam Co Dong River provides a good example of how heavily contested this barrier was. Go Dau Ha is a small village located near a bridge that was on a direct route to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This bridge had been partially destroyed by the Vietcong during TET, but still retained its strategic importance as a fairly direct route to Saigon. A description of ATSB Go Dau Ha security measures is provided below:

> ATSB Go Dau Ha suffered rocket and mortar attacks, ground probes, sniper fire, and minings, but each attack was repulsed by the fire of the base and the boats stationed there. And, as lessons were learned, the defenses were strengthened. Stand-off rocket fences were built beyond the perimeter to pre-detonate incoming rounds. A large chain link fence was erected along the north side of the bridge to prevent a Honda-mounted sapper from dropping

a satchel charge on the base as he crossed the bridge. Trip flares and claymore mines were also installed. And, the Viet Cong found that the Navy had come to stay.[36]

The Giant Slingshot Operation got off to a running start. The early results clearly indicated that the barrier was interdicting enemy supply lines and that, as the Go Dau Ha experience shows, this interdiction would not go unchallenged. Giant Slingshot patrol units were to encounter hostile fire sixty-eight times during the month of January 1969, the first full month of operation. Losses included eight USN, one US Army, and fifteen Vietnamese (ARVN, VNN, RF/PF, CIDG) killed in action.[37] Also during this first month the following material was captured:

188,000 rounds small arms ammunition
3,000 rounds heavy machine gun ammunition
3 122-mm rockets
355 B-40 rockets
361 RPG-2 rounds/boosters
678 recoilless rifle rounds
1,810 mortar rounds
2,000 pounds of explosives plus detonators, etc.
1,914 grenades
313 mines
112 individual weapons
22 sampans
31,000 pounds rice [38]

In addition to the material results of the operation, during this same period Giant Slingshot forces accounted for seventy enemy forces killed (fifty body count plus twenty probable), nine wounded, and twenty captured.[39] Admiral Zumwalt viewed the initial operations as highly successful, "We captured tons and tons of equipment, both in caches along the banks and in sinking sampans that were seeking to use these channels. And within a matter of a few months General Abrams told me that he felt the impact had been greatly to reduce the casualties in the Army and greatly to accelerate pacification of the Delta."[40]

July of 1969 saw the next major outbreak of enemy contact in the Giant Slingshot area of operations. Intelligence reports indicated that large-scale enemy forces were planning to attack the city of Tay Ninh. Tay Ninh, the third largest city in South Vietnam, was seen as an ideal site for the capital of the newly formed Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government. In addition to the enormous propaganda effect that a victory in this area would achieve, it would also be a logical stepping off point for future attacks on Saigon.[41]

In reaction to this threat, Zumwalt implemented operation "Double Shift" on 8 July 1969. Essentially, Double Shift, as the name implies, was a doubling of resources in the targeted area. CTF 116 redeployed four river divisions, allocating two each to Tay Ninh and Go Dau Ha. Forces were also bolstered by additional VNN River Assault and Interdiction Divisions (RAID) and a river assault division from TF 117. The 25th Infantry Division was entrenched outside Tay Ninh to counter ground forces. Within twenty-four hours of issuance of orders, naval forces were in place, prompting the following bold message to Zumwalt, "Double Shift completed in double time with doubled units ready to give double trouble."[42]

Double Shift units saw fifteen days of around-the-clock operations. During this period the operation accounted for thirty-four enemy killed by body count with sixty-four probable kills, forty-one wounded, two captured, and three detained. These statistics resulted from seventeen enemy initiated firefights (ENIFF), seventy friendly initiated fire fights (FRIFF), and forty-nine instances of unilateral fire. Numerous enemy small craft were destroyed or sunk. By 23 July 1969, enemy activity in the Tay Ninh area had been reduced to a level that permitted withdrawal of the additional forces. As a result of Double Shift, the enemy was forced to abandon plans for a coordinated assault on Tay Ninh.[43]

As one would expect, the initial casualties for Sealords were high, more so in the Giant Slingshot area of operations than elsewhere. The key was in determining when a river patrol

section was played out due to combat stress and should be relieved by fresh units. Admiral Zumwalt was concerned about the level of casualties:

> Our guys got in and we took those fearsome casualties at the beginning for the first couple of months-they were running at the rate of about six percent a month, which if projected meant that the average young man had about a 70 percent probability of being killed or wounded in his year's tour. That's when I began to use the Agent Orange and change tactics from patrolling to ambushing. . . . And within a matter of a few months General Abrams told me that he felt the impact had been greatly to reduce the casualties in the Army and also greatly to accelerate pacification of the Delta.[44]

With Giant Slingshot now well underway it was time to complete this cordon of steel by linking the barriers in the west with the Giant Slingshot forces in the east. Thus the fourth and final interdiction barrier, Barrier Reef, was established in January 1969. Cutting across the Plain of Reeds portion of the delta this barrier, when linked-up, would provide for uninterrupted border interdiction from the Gulf of Thailand to east of the Parrot's Beak region.

Operation Barrier Reef

Operation Barrier Reef commenced on 2 January 1969 on the La Grange-Ong Lon Canal. The La Grange-Ong Lon Canal system ran from Tuyen Nhon on the Vam Co Tay River to An Long on the upper Mekong River (fig. 3). This resulted in an eighty-eight kilometer area of operations which was navigable throughout the year to PBRs. The Barrier Reef Operation was situated in the Plain of Reeds portion of the delta. Two significant geostrategic points can be drawn concerning the location of this barrier. First, the barrier varies from between ten and thirty kilometers from the Cambodian border (the furthest of the four barriers from Cambodia). Second, in addition to it being located at a greater distance from the Cambodian border, the Plain of Reeds region is very flat and open thus increasing the level of risk to infiltrating enemy units once discovered.[45]

As with the other interdiction barriers, the enemy reacted strongly to yet another infringement on previously uncontested infiltration routes. And, as with the other barriers, initial successes were high as the enemy was caught off-guard. An important victory occurred during the first two weeks of the operation when patrol units supported by Popular Forces' (PF) ambush teams were twice able to turn back an enemy heavy weapons company attempting to cross the canal. Thwarted in the crossing attempts, the company was eventually discovered by Army reconnaissance aircraft and gunship strikes produced heavy enemy casualties virtually destroying the company.[46]

As an example of how intense some of the early fighting was at this barrier the following is recounted from after-action reports,

> Task Unit 116.5.4 (four PBRs, one ATC) on a Barrier Reef West patrol, about 8 miles west of Dinh Dien Phuoc Xuyen, received heavy rocket, small arms, and automatic weapons fire from both banks of the canal at 2200, 20 January. One of the PBRs was sunk but its crew was recovered by the cover boat. Seawolves were scrambled and upon arrival one of them was shot down. The remaining Seawolf rescued the crew of the downed aircraft. One hundred to two hundred Viet Cong were observed to be advancing in the area of the downed helo. "Spooky" aircraft and an additional LHFT arrived on the scene to cover the sunk boat and downed helo. ASPBs arrived and after effecting emergency repairs took the sunken PBR under tow. The ASPBs also coordinated all MEDEVACS. U.S. casualties were one killed and 11 wounded (four on helo). Enemy losses are unknown.[47]

With Barrier Reef well in place, the first phase of Zumwalt's SEALORDS strategy was complete. That is, an effective interdiction campaign had been instituted along almost the entire length of the Cambodian border. What remained was for the young and brave sailors manning the river patrol units to aggressively and relentlessly continue these operations as well as to come up with new and innovative tactics to keep the enemy off guard. The stage was thus set for the next phase of SEALORDS to commence.

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[1]Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., USN (Ret.), personal interview by author, Arlington, VA, 23 September 1996, 4, tape recording and transcript in author's possession.

[2]Zumwalt, interview, 9.

[3]Howard J. Kerr, Jr., Captain, USN (Ret.), interview by Paul Stillwell, Arlington, VA, on 22 September 1982, 23.

[4]Zumwalt, interview, 13

[5]Kerr, interview, 27.

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CHAPTER III

SEALORDS PHASE II--DENIAL OF SANCTUARY OPERATIONS AND PACIFICATION

The barriers put in place during the first phase of SEALORDS were intended to isolate the battlefield in South Vietnam from outside forces. By doing this, the operation supported General Abrams' strategic objectives in the area of pacification and security in the Mekong Delta villages and the vital trans-delta waterways. It was generally recognized by this time that the strategy of attrition employed by Abrams predecessor, General Westmoreland, was not achieving the desired results. For this reason, at the very time that SEALORDS was getting underway General Abrams was revising MACV's pacification strategy and developing the Accelearated Pacification Program that began in November 1968. Zumwalt felt that his forces could also contribute to this effort.

COMNAVFORV Operation Plan 111-69 (SEALORDS OPLAN) states that: "Concurrently with strike and interdiction operations, PCFs and WPBs will conduct raids . . . into enemy base areas. These operations will be designed to disrupt the enemy, keep him off balance."[1] Captain Robert Powers, USN (Retired), explains further:

> The second part of SEALORDS was to establish specific denial areas, areas that we would surround and move into which had been theretofore and in some cases traditionally Viet Cong strongholds. Of course, this fit right in with General Abram's desire to number one, stop the infiltration,and number two, pacify or secure various parts of the Delta that had been Viet Cong strongholds.[2]

The first area to be attacked under this new strategy was in the area of the Ca Mau Peninsula. The Ca Mau Peninsula is the southernmost region of South Vietnam, approximately

200 miles southwest of Saigon (see fig. 4). This region had long been an enemy stronghold, a safe haven due to its remoteness and harsh environment. Since the Tet offensive it had been pretty much written off by U.S. forces and the GVN. It was here that Zumwalt decided to next strike at the Vietcong in a combined USN/VNN operation known as Sea Float.

Sea Float

In addition to the tactical significance of the Ca Mau Peninsula, Zumwalt felt strongly about conducting this operation for other reasons as well. First, it had once been a productive and industrious region of South Vietnam. However, under the Vietcong it had fallen into disuse and abandonment. The pacification effort in the Delta could be greatly advanced if the region were regained. Secondly, Admiral Tran Van Chon, Commander of the South Vietnamese Navy (VNN), had revealed to Zumwalt that the VNN had been kicked out of this area in the early 1960s and that he strongly desired winning back this region. Zumwalt maintained a very close working relationship with his Vietnamese counterpart and took his concerns and ideas into account.[3]

In his memoirs, Zumwalt explains this matter further:

> It occurred to me that if the Navy could gain control of a section of the principal river in that area, it might be possible for a resettlement effort to begin on the river banks and gradually spread up and down stream and inland as the foothold expanded. The local Army judged a riverside base in that part of the country to be foolishly risky so I hit upon the expedient of setting a base up on pontoons anchored in midstream. The local Army people judged that to be even more foolishly risky but General Abrams, overruling the IV Corps Senior Advisor, approved it.[4]

Sea Float, as this floating base would be called, would remain one of Zumwalt's favorite wild ideas. When asked about his wild idea, Zumwalt recalled,

> Identifying ideas with a kind of ridiculous title encouraged people to disagree which is really what I wanted in a situation as dangerous as that. I knew that I would have lots of ideas and that somewhere between 50-80 percent of them would be good but I wanted to be

damn sure that guys were courageous enough to shoot them down when they weren't. So I deliberately called them Zumwalt's Wild Ideas to put that connotation across.[5]

Operation Sea Float officially began on 27 June 1969. Ammipontoon barges (described in chapter two) were assembled together in Saigon and then transported via LSDs to the mouth of the Bo De River. From here, the floating base was towed up the Bo De and Cua Lon rivers and anchored across from what had been Nam Can City before it had been deserted. The mooring of Sea Float in tidal currents that sometimes reached six-to-eight knots required expert seamanship. A six-point, fore-and-aft moor using 9,000-pound destroyer anchors backed up by heavy concrete clumps was used.[6]

In addition to the normal support requirements for operating the base (e.g., water storage, fuel storage, etc.), Sea Float also contained facilities with which to conduct successful psychological operations (PSYOPS). These included medical support facilities, berthing and messing for transient civilians, and staff support areas for PSYOPs teams. Sea Float also contained a helo deck for operating Seawolf helicopters.

The initial enemy response to Sea Float was primarily aimed at conducting a propaganda campaign. Leaflets which were printed in both English and Vietnamese floated by Sea Float and warned that the VC would "Blast the American navy out of the water." Banners found along the riverbanks read "American and Vietnamese soldiers who come here will die." In addition, Hanoi Hannah in her daily radio broadcast on 15 July stated that Sea Float would be on the bottom of the Song Cua Lon by 18 July 1969.[7]

However, Sea Float was not put on the bottom. Instead, by the end of its first full month in existence, Sea Float recorded a record day with over 348 visitors.[8] With the eviction of VC tax collectors from the waterways and the transformation of Market Time forces into something more akin to beat policeman, civilian traffic on the rivers increased.[9] With the increase in

civilian traffic and visitors to Sea Float, more information was obtained with regard to the location of VC elements. This information was in turn acted upon by patrol units.

Sea Float came to employ both joint and combined forces. Although primarily a USN/VNN operation, ground force support was sought as well. In addition to active SEAL involvement, Zumwalt approved a plan to use Kit Carson Scouts in July 1969. These former VC who had switched loyalties to the GVN would prove themselves in raiding and intelligence gathering operations. In addition, Zumwalt was able to secure U.S. Army Mobile Strike Force (MSF) troops in August of 1969. These highly regarded soldiers were inserted by Navy PCFs to conduct aggressive patrols in the Sea Float area of operations. An example of such an operation is provided below:

> On the morning of 20 August 1969, PCFs 56, 35, and 9 with 120 MSF troops embarked, entered the Cai Nhap Canal and inserted the troops at three locations along the bank about seven miles northeast of Sea Float. Two Swift boats exited the canal while PCFs 36 and 56 established a waterborne guard post for support of the troops. The troops sweeping west made contact and received and suppressed 60mm mortar and small arms fire and destroyed four bunkers, three structures and numerous digging tools. The second group found several antipersonnel mines and captured two VC suspects at a VC base camp and detained 28 women and children. This group also received 60mm mortar, small arms, and automatic weapons (A/W) fire. Troops and detainees then moved back to the canal and all were extracted except 20 MSF troops who took up positions along the bank. At 2045, the troops observed three sampans travelling north on the Rach Cai Nhap which stopped to pick up 3-4 persons 200 yards south of the MSF troop site. When the boats passed the ambush site they were illuminated and taken under fire at point blank range; eight VC were killed and the sampans destroyed. About 20 minutes later another sampan with four males came to search for the bodies. It was also taken under fire and four VC were killed. The MSF troops were then extracted and returned to Sea Float. The operation resulted in 12 VC killed and 30 personnel detained.[10]

Sea Float would ultimately prove very effective in establishing a permanent presence in the Ca Mau Peninsula. VC Attempts to destroy Sea Float via floating mines and ambush attacks were countered successfully. Sea Float proved so successful in denying the enemy sanctuary in this area that it was eventually moved ashore and became known as Operation Solid Anchor.

Another of Zumwalt's wild ideas (ZWIs) would spark the next denial operation code-named Ready Deck.

Ready Deck

In early May of 1969 it was decided that a patrol boat presence (PBRs) was needed on the upper Saigon River. This was determined based on Zumwalt's conjecture that the successes of the Giant Slingshot campaign had forced the Viet Cong to attempt an end run to the northeast via the upper Saigon River (see fig. 5). The problem was that the enemy had blown up a bridge which prevented access up the river by the PBRs. This was when Zumwalt hit upon the idea of airlifting the boats via helo, heretofore untried, to the upper Saigon River. Rear Admiral Arthur W. Price, Jr., USN (Retired), remembers:

> Early in May of 1969 we conducted the first airlift of PBRs in the war when we used an Army Skytrain helicopter. We transported six boats from the Vam Co Dong River to the upper Saigon River in an operation that achieved tactical surprise. The whole idea was because the Saigon River was blocked by a bridge the VC had blown up months before. The only way we could get the boats over the blown-up bridge was by helicopter so we got the Army to lift them up for us, and we put them up on the river, and we kept them up the river for an operation that was called [Ready Deck]. He (Zumwalt) had some wild ideas. It was his idea about flying boats to the upper Saigon River. At the time, I sort of laughed at it, Goddam, flying those things in there, then, again, of course, it might work. Of course, it did work.[11]

As with other SEALORDS operations this venture achieved tactical surprise and early success. Originally conceived as supporting one river division (PBRs), it was expanded to two as operations heated up. The PBRs were to patrol the area between Phu Cuong (where a crude ATSB had been established) and Dau Tieng. The task group would also conduct joint and combined operations on the upper Saigon with the 1st Infantry Division and the 5th ARVN Division.

As with the other interdiction barriers, patterns soon emerged. The waterborne guardposts (WGPs), described in chapter two as PBR ambush tactics, proved particularly

effective. The dense foliage along the riverbanks supported the tactic. Additionally, the enemy seemed reluctant to abandon favored, though compromised, crossing points. One explanation given for this seemingly gross tactical error was that it was likely that VC/NVA transportation companies were unable to communicate with one another while on the march, and the long length of time that it took for the survivors of the ambush to report back up the line.[12]

On 11 December 1969 Ready Deck became a combined VNN-USN operation under VNN command. This was significant in that it was the first interdiction barrier to be placed under VNN command. The operation was renamed Tran Hung Dao V/Ready Deck to reflect VNN participation. At the same time RIVDIV 571 (U.S.) departed the operating area and was replaced by eight PBRs of VNN RPG 51. The VNN acquitted themselves well during their first month of ownership of this barrier which provided positive feedback in support of Zumwalt's ACTOV program that is fully addressed in chapter four.

As an example of some of the intense fighting that occured in the Ready Deck AOR, a short battle narrative is provided. In a pitched battle on the night of 31 December 1969, starting around 2000 and continuing until daybreak the following morning, VNN river patrol units that were engaged initially in a salvage operation, repulsed repeated VC B-40 rocket attacks, automatic and semiautomatic weapons fire, and swimmer attacks. During the battle they successfully called in Black Pony and helicopter support as well as artillery and illumination fire. By the time the fighting was over, one of the longest riverine engagements of the war had become one of the most successful. There were no friendly casualties, and enemy casualties were placed at thirty-seven VC killed including twelve by body count.[13]

The Ready Deck operation had proved successful and had served to keep the enemy off balance. It had achieved great tactical surprise by the airlifting of patrol boats. It had also provided an opportunity for the VNN to demonstrate their growing proficiency in battle.

Subsequent activity in the Ready Deck AOR would decrease, the element of surprise no longer present. The operation would continue, however, for the duration of SEALORDS.

Rung Sat Operations

Concurrently with Ready Deck, another denial of sanctuary operation was conducted in an area known as the Rung Sat Special Zone (RSSZ). The RSSZ had been a thorn in the side of U.S. military leaders since the start of the war. A dense mangrove swamp covering over 400 square miles stretching from Nha Be southeast to Vung Tau and the South China Sea, it also contained the Long Tau River, the main shipping channel between Saigon and the South China Sea.[14] Enemy mining of the Long Tau began in earnest in 1966 in an attempt to cut the South's lifelines to Saigon. While the VC were never successful in severing this strategic LOC, mining and shipping attacks remained a threat throughout 1967 and 1968 despite stepped-up allied attempts at countering this threat.

Part of the problem was the nature of the environment in the Rung Sat itself. SEAL operations after-action reports in 1968 report that, "The foliage is so thick that it is not unlikely for a patrol to be within a Viet Cong base camp and not realize it." Additionally, it was almost impossible to move without generating excessive noise, making the element of surprise difficult to achieve, and putting patrols at risk of being counterattacked.[15] U.S. Army 9th Division troops and Vietnamese RF forces conducted sweeps of the area but were ineffective in significantly reducing the enemy threat.

Vice Admiral Robert S. Salzer, U.S. Navy (Retired), who in 1967-68 was serving as Commander CTF 117, later talked about the persistent threat in the Rung Sat, the U.S. Army's response, and the mine threat in particular:

> They (U.S. Army) ran into an ambush. They came storming ashore in battalion-sized strength. That's one of the weaknesses of the Army, incidentally. They like to do everything

> with battalion-sized strength, and the Viet Cong wouldn't melt away. . . . Mines were very prominent parts of the threat in there (Long Tau). I'm talking about controlled mines, I'm talking about homemade mines, some quite large, that would be implanted on the bottom with an electric cable, usually shielded by bamboo shielding over it, and some little fellow would sit in his hootch, as we called them, and watch with a simple sight, then he'd go "pumph", and the ship would go up. It was a real threat, to the boats as well as the ships and they used it quite a bit.[16]

It was not as if U.S. forces were unaware of where the threat was coming from. It was known that attacks on shipping were coming from a VC battalion known as DOAN-10 operating from a base camp just north of the Rung Sat in the Nhon Trach district of the Bien Hoa Province. Zumwalt's predecessor, Rear Admiral Veth, had been alarmed by the attacks, but had done little to counter them. Veth had faced indifference at General Abram's headquarters and opposition from South Vietnam's generals.[17] The flawed Vietnamese command structure compounded the problem. That is, despite the growth of the VNN during this time period, they were stilled viewed as a subordinate service with respect to the other armed services in South Vietnam. Moreover, commanders were tied to geographic areas, and as the Rung Sat belonged to the VNN, ARVN generals were reluctant to commit ground troops to the area.

In June of 1969 there were fifteen attacks on Long Tau shipping, and a concerned Admiral Zumwalt was determined to do something about it.[18] Zumwalt decided that the only way to secure the channel was to strike at the Vietcong's base at Nhon Trach. General Abrams agreed, but he would not or could not provide American troops for the operation.[19] In characteristic Zumwalt fashion, he was not to be deterred due to lack of available ground troops and set about raising his own "Army." Zumwalt assembled an international force consisting of two battalions of the Royal Thai Army Volunteer force (about 2,000 men) reinforced by Vietnamese Regional Force Companies and National Police; one company of the 1st Australian Task Force; U.S. Army helicopters; one company of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in the

capacity of a ready reaction team; Vietnamese Navy River Assault Groups (RAGs); Vietnamese Regional Force Companies; and U.S. Navy units including SEALS, PBRs, ASPBs and a Zippo.[20]

The objective of the operation was to destroy VC bases and havens as well as to disrupt their LOCs in the Nhon Trach District. Operations commenced on 0600, 24 June 1969 and continued until 2400, 30 June. Overall results of the operation were fifty-one Viet Cong killed (forty-four body count and seven probable) and two POW's. Allied casualties were limited to one Thai killed, twenty-three Thai wounded and two U.S. wounded.[21] The success of this operation prompted Zumwalt to keep the pressure up and continue with raiding operations in the Rung Sat. In August two more joint and combined operations were conducted code-named Friendship and Platypus. Again the operations were aimed at cutting enemy communications and liaison routes into the Rung Sat.

The results of these operations exceeded all expectations. Enemy attacks against shipping in the Long Tau Channel virtually ceased. Minesweeping operations were able to continue without the threat of enemy attack. SEAL teams continued to operate with Vietnamese Provisional Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) in order to maintain the momentum that had been achieved in the RSSZ. Additionally, herbicides and U.S. Army "Rome Plows" (armored bulldozers) were used to destroy cover formerly enjoyed by the enemy sapper battalion.[22] By January of 1970 three consecutive months had passed during which there had been no attacks on shipping on the Long Tau.[23] Security in the Rung Sat had been greatly enhanced.

Breezy Cove

The last denial of sanctuary operations was begun in September of 1969 with patrols on the Song Ong Doc River. The Song Ong Doc bordered an a densely wooded and isolated area known as the U Minh Forest. Many facets of this operation would mirror the larger Sea Float

operation to the south. Captain Robert Powers, USN (Retired), then a lieutenant commander, remembers:

> We were sitting in the admiral's office (Zumwalt) one day looking at the map and he said, "How in the world, Bob, do we get at the U Minh Forest, and where do we go now with SEALORDS? We've got Tran Hung Dao, Barrier Reef, Giant Slingshot, Ready Deck, Seafloat. We've got all these guys moved in. Is there anything left to do?" So we poked around at the map a little while and said, Well, You know, the place we really haven't hit is the U Minh Forest, and there's this big old river that runs right up alongside of it."... So he said, "All right. Set up a helicopter. Let's fly down there and look at it." So he and I and our Marine sergeant flew down there in a little village, and we were invited to have lunch with the village chief. . . . We finally ended up getting permission from the village chief to put another floating base similar to the one we'd put at Seafloat." [24]

The U Minh Forest, long a VC stronghold, was tactically significant in that it could be used both as a sanctuary and as a means of waterborne infiltration into the Ca Mau area by way of the VC Lake (see fig. 4). A COMNAVFORV message dated 18 September 1969 spells out the impetus behind the operation:

> Situation: The Song Ong Doc is one of the principal water LOCs leading to the city of CA Mau. As such, its freedom of use as a trade route is important to the growth and GVN control of the city of Ca Mau and An Xuyen Province. Enemy units operating along this waterway impede the flow of waterborne traffic by harassment and tax extortion operations. . . .
>
> Mission: Conduct patrols, night waterborne guardpost, mine countermeasures, and bank sweeps (utilizing RF/PF or 21st ARVN Div troops as available). . . . Conduct active PSYOP programs . . . in order to stimulate the resettlement of the areas along the waterway and to promote the GVN image.[25]

The operation, code-named Breezy Cove, commenced on 28 September 1969 with the arrival of ten PBRs from River Division 572. An ATSB made-up of five ammipontoons had been delivered by USS *Garrett County* (LST 786) and was moored near the mouth of the Song Ong Doc. By months end, heavier river assault craft had been added to this force.

As an operation, Breezy Cove acquired many of the characteristics of Sea Float, although on a lesser scale. In its first three weeks, 446 refugees arrived in the vicinity of the ATSB, seeking security.[26] A new village was formed near the floating base named "New Song

Ong Doc." In November of 1969 the VNN joined the operation with a division of PBRs. Additionally the ATSB was expanded in order to meet the growing operation. By November 1969 pacification of the waterways had improved dramatically. A Vietnamese junk master told an American officer that for the first time in eleven years he could travel the river from Old Song Doc to Ca Mau without fear of VC tax extortion.[27]

Impressive statistics speak to the amount of enemy contact throughout the operation's existence. Breezy Cove would average approximately forty enemy killed per month. In February 1970 this figure would soar to 230. In that month the number of engagements with the enemy had remained about the same; however, the size of the enemy forces encountered had increased considerably. This possibly indicated that either an enemy offensive was planned or that the VC were reacting in desperation.[28] As with other SEALORDS operations Breezy Cove would eventually be assumed by the Vietnamese Navy in December of 1970 and renamed Tran Hung Dao X.

Pacification

While an in-depth study of the pacification program in South Vietnam is beyond the scope of this thesis, it should be noted that the SEALORDS program (as depicted in the operations above) played a major role in the pacification effort in the Mekong Delta. In fact, one of the criticisms of the Vietnam War is that early on the U.S. failed to pay enough attention to the pacification effort. That is, we were irnoring the political dimension of the war that was taking place in the villages and hamletswas being ignored, and instead focused on training the ARVN to fight a conventional war. Former CIA Director, the late William Colby in his book Lost Victory describes the lack of an effective pacification program as "the lost years of the

middle sixties."[29] Accordingly, the pacification effort had been unflatteringly referred to as "the other war."

Having relieved General Westmoreland in mid-1968, General Abrams was determined to make the pacification program work. Zumwalt, as his naval component commander, correctly interpreted and implemented Abram's directives with SEALORDS. The SEALORDS operation identified pacification as a primary effort up front. The operation plan states, "MISSION: Disrupt enemy infiltration routes and pacify vital trans-Delta waterways. . . ."[30] Zumwalt instituted several programs that would aid the pacification process. Two of these were called Medcaps, where the patrol forces would take a doctor out to a village, and Dencaps where likewise, dentists visited the villages. In an effort to better understand the Vietnamese people, Zumwalt had social scientists conduct cultural sensitivity training within his command. This precedent setting training was the first of its kind and was a fairly audacious undertaking given the environment and the times. This will be addressed further in chapter four.

In addition to providing freedom of movement on the canals and waterways for local civilians to get their crops to the market (without fear of tax extortion from the VC), SEALORDS personnel made a concerted effort to win back the civilian populace. An example of this activity is the Navy building a school for refugee children during Operation Breezy Cove.[31] Similarly, such services as small engine repair and tool sharpening were provided at bases. When viewed by an outsider this may seem somewhat trivial, but they were seen as very valuable to the local peasant.

Rear Admiral Arthur W. Price, Jr., USN (Retired), at the time Commander CTF 116, provides a vivid picture of the pacification of the delta:

> When I went there in March of 1968 and by the time I left--I was relieved in June 1969--I could see by being in a helicopter most of the time going from base to base, the overall country side becoming greener and greener because a lot of that country had not been under

> cultivation since the fifties and the early sixties, and yet we're talking about the rice bowl of Southeast Asia. Out there in enemy territory it was all brown, dead, and unkept. And then from the cities I could see, as time went on, that it was getting greener and greener the farther out we went. . . . And I really noticed it when I went back in 1971, when we flew down the delta for the first time. It was unbelievable!--green as far as you could see. So we knew it worked.[32]

As a further comment on the pacification effort, it is worth noting that during the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972, almost two years after SEALORDS officially ended, the North did not attack in the delta. This may well indicate that the SEALORDS operations described above and in the previous chapter not only secured the delta, but in denying the enemy his previous sanctuaries, had extended his supply lines to where he could not support an offensive in the delta. Moreover, the delta was viewed as secure enough to support moving the 21st ARVN Division out of the delta to north of Saigon during this offensive. This was unusual, as the ARVN, being highly provincial in deployment of forces, rarely moved a division.

The SEALORDS campaign had, from the start, incorporated the Vietnamese Navy into its operational fold. By early 1969, the Nixon administration had adopted an official policy of Vietnamization of the war. With SEALORDS, Zumwalt had gotten the Navy out ahead of the other services with respect to turning over the war effort to the Vietnamese. He called his program ACTOV which stood for Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese. The ACTOV program is the subject of chapter four.

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CHAPTER IV

ACCELERATED TURNOVER TO THE VIETNAMESE

Zumwalt came to Vietnam convinced that the South Vietnamese would have to assume the major responsibility for fighting the war, and he quickly set out to prepare the South Vietnamese Navy for this task. He named his program Accelerated Turnover to the Vietnamese and gave it the acronym ACTOV because ACTOV sounded like "active," which is what he intended for the program to be. As this chapter will show, ACTOV was an integral part of SEALORDS. It was a program which Zumwalt admits still touches a chord close to his heart.

In early November 1968, shortly after reaching Vietnam, Admiral Zumwalt had the first opportunity to present his ACTOV plan to General Crieghton Abrams. The forum was a meeting called by General Abrams to discuss turnover plans and was attended by all the services. General Abrams had just returned from Washington where he had been summoned to a secret meeting with President Johnson. Johnson was extremely frustrated with the way the war was going and had given Abrams a vivid picture of his intention to make the South Vietnamese do more of the fighting. Looking Abrams straight in the eye, Johnson had told him that he had orders to "muster every Vietnamese with a penis and get him into military uniform."[1]

Abrams did not, of course, have the authority to implement this type of program, but he knew that he had to begin the process that would become known as Vietnamization. His purpose on this day in early November was to see how this could be accomplished. The Air Force had elected to brief first. An Air Force colonel in an immaculate uniform got up and proceeded with a flawless briefing supported by impressive color slides projecting turnover through 1976.

Captain Howard Kerr, Jr., USN, (RET), then serving as flag lieutenant to Admiral Zumwalt and present at the briefing, described Abrams' reaction as follows:

> General Abrams was watching him. I happened to look over. All of a sudden, he put his hand up on his head, and stared at the table. This colonel was continuing in his monologue. General Abrams put the cigar in his mouth, and he raised his right hand and he made a fist and he hit the table. And when he did, the ashtray in front of him flipped over and came crashing down on this table. The colonel stopped briefing, and everyone at the table turned to General Abrams. He said, "Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!" All I ever get out of the Air Force is a bunch of bullshit.[2]

After this outburst, General Abrams went on to say that President Johnson was in a pressure-cooker environment back in the United States and that he had no consensus for support of the war. He said that the policy was clearly to start turning the war over to the South Vietnamese and that the Air Force timetable that had just been presented for turnover was simply far too long. After that he got up and left the briefing.[3]

At this point General Abrams' Chief of Staff, Major General Corcoran walked over to Admiral Zumwalt and told him that General Abrams was exhausted from that quick trip in and out of Washington and as he could see was mad as hell. He asked Zumwalt if he would like to cancel this briefing and do it again later. Zumwalt replied no, that he would like to brief. As Zumwalt recalls this meeting:

> I told my briefer that wherever we had "may", we would put "will" in the slides-so we just crossed it out in china pencil and when General Abrams came back about 15 minutes later I briefed him. And then the Air Force and the Army began to criticize this plan. General Abrams shut them up and said, "look this guy has something, he's the only one that's got a plan and the rest of you get hot." And he put his arm around me and walked out with me and showed everybody that I was his boy for the day.[4]

With Abrams' approval the ACTOV plan was soon up and running. There still remained, however, final approval from the chain of command up to the Secretary of Defense. Zumwalt had to lobby hard to get his ambitious plan approved. There was some reluctance in the Defense Department to turning over virtually all of the in-country naval assets although it was conceded

that the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) would need these assets to counter communist infiltration. The final plan was approved on 12 February 1969.

Zumwalt designated Captain Charles (Chick) Rauch, Jr., (later Rear Admiral) as his point man for ACTOV. In order to turn over such a large number of ships it was imperative that the force structure for the VNN increase considerably. In fact, by 1972 the size of the VNN would more than double. Rauch was then presented with the problem of how best to train this rapidly expanding force.

First, it was determined that in order to overcome the language barrier new recruits would be taught English. Zumwalt felt very strongly that the Vietnamese should learn English rather than vice versa. There were several reasons for this. First, the Vietnamese language was an agrarian language and not suited for the technical jargon related to operating modern shipboard equipment. There simply did not exist words in their vocabulary for many of the terms required. Second, Admiral Chon, the VNN Chief of Naval Operations, viewed the VNN as an international service, unlike the other two services in the country, and he thought that his officers and men ought to be able to speak an international language (i.e., English). Zumwalt also advocated sending some of the brightest students to the U.S. for a year on sort of an exchange program in which to learn English. Additionally, many of the recruits from the cities had a rudimentary knowledge of written English that had been taught in schools. It was thus settled that English would become the common language of the two navies and training was instituted.[5]

In January 1969, a joint USN-VNN Boat School was opened in Saigon to prepare VNN trainees for assignment to operational PCFs and PBRs. In addition to boat orientation, emphasis was placed on accelerated English language training.[6] Rauch had contracted with civilian

consultants experienced in the area of education and training to assist in setting the school up. Included in the building was a mock-up of a PBR that was used as a static display.

After having received the basic training mentioned above the VNN sailor was then ready to report for duty on the patrol boats. The ACTOV plan relied upon a form of on-the-job training whereby Vietnamese sailors were to relieve U.S. sailors on a one-for-one basis, but staggered to provide for a smoother turnover of the patrol boats. Rear Admiral Arthur W. Price, Jr., USN (Retired), then a Captain and Commander of Task Force 116, best describes this process:

> The composition of a PBR was a four-man boat crew, a "captain", an engineer, a gunner, and a seaman. So what I elected to do was integrate the Vietnamese Navy . . . with our navy. We would assign one sailor to each PBR, and normally we'd start off with a seaman. It meant then that we had a boat crew of four U.S. and one Vietnamese, a boat crew of five. As soon as that Vietnamese sailor was checked out, we removed the American sailor from the boat and added another sailor, Vietnamese. That would give us still five, but then we would have three U.S. and two Vietnamese, and so forth. Then the gunner, engineer. The boat captain was the last man to be trained, and as soon as he was trained and qualified, then we turned the complete boat over to the Vietnamese Navy. Not the unit but the boat. That boat then fought side by side with American Navy units for that American Navy commander. This was until we had sufficient boats with Vietnamese crews qualified to enable us to turn over a whole unit to the Vietnamese.[7]

In an interview for this study, Rear Admiral Tran Van Chon, former CNO of the VNN, spoke very highly of this on-the-job training. It was his feeling that this approach accelerated the learning of VNN personnel in advance of receiving manuals and training curricula tailored to their needs. He also felt that the morale of the VNN during ACTOV was outstanding, principally due to the recognition of their developing strengths and their ability to accomplish their mission to contain and defeat the enemy. It was also recognized by the VNN that the preponderance of boats and equipment and the attendant responsibility for operating them would soon be theirs, which increased their motivation.

There were several innovative features of ACTOV that deserve mention. First among these is the Personal Response Program (PRP), which provided cultural sensitivity training designed to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Captain Rauch had located a social scientist by the name of Bob Humphrey who was at the time under contract in Thailand. Humphrey had conducted studies in cross-cultural relationships and attitudinal barriers between different cultures. Rauch had Humphrey brief Zumwalt. The brief impressed upon Zumwalt the need to create a program that would help his people better understand the Vietnamese culture.[8]

Rauch quickly instituted the PRP. Using material he had obtained from Humphrey and recruiting some energetic young officers as well as a chaplain, Rauch put together a test program. Seminars were conducted throughout South Vietnam. Any Navy personnel who were going to have any contact whatsoever with the Vietnamese, officer or enlisted, were required to attend. Rauch also realized that he had to be very careful instituting such a program in the military. He did not want the perception to be that it was too touchy-feely.[9] Rear Admiral Rauch explains some specifics of the program,

> Essentially what Fedgie (NAVFORV Chaplain) did was he started giving out surveys. . . . He would get a lot of Vietnamese in the area, civilians around as well as military people in a particular area, to write down what they liked about the Americans and what they didn't like about the Americans. Then he would give the survey to our people and ask them the same questions about the Vietnamese. Then in the seminars he would get people together and he would have done his homework and he would take some of the things that we did not like about the Vietnamese and explain why they did those things and try to put it into the perspective of that's okay in their culture. In our culture we might not like it, but in their culture its okay. . . . Something as simple as the Vietnamese taking Sundays off in the middle of a war. Well, you know, when you explain they have been in this war for 30 years, or if its not this one, its another one, that's a little bit easier to see then if you're over there for one year. That's the kind of thing that he would do.[10]

Zumwalt recognized that the success of ACTOV depended upon the successful interaction between the USN personnel and the VNN sailors and enthusiastically backed the PRP program. The PRP program would grow from this humble beginning and eventually be

administered in the U.S. to naval advisors enroute to Vietnam. Later Zumwalt would introduce some of these same innovative ideas during his tenure as CNO.

Another important aspect of ACTOV was an attempt by Zumwalt to raise the standard of living of the Vietnamese sailor. One of the costs of the war was rampant inflation in the Vietnamese economy which far outpaced servicemen's salaries. In order to help alleviate this disparity, Zumwalt introduced the Dependent Shelter and Animal Husbandry Program. Zumwalt believed that construction of VNN-dependent shelters was critical to the success of the naval advisory effort in Vietnam. He asked for and received $900,000 in military construction funds in October of 1969. Zumwalt also persuaded a group of U.S. executives doing business in Saigon to form a foundation to solicit and receive donations for the VNN shelter project.[11] The result was the Operation Helping Hand Foundation. By March of 1970 construction of the shelters was underway at 16 different locations with 653 units completed and 537 under construction.[12]

The animal husbandry part of the program consisted of importing small livestock into Vietnam for distribution to the families. This program known as "pigs and chickens" among American Navy men, added protein to the poor Vietnamese diet and had the advantage of being self-perpetuating through breeding.[13] However, the benefits of the program went further than providing a cheap source of protein. Admiral Tran Van Chon, then CNO of the Vietnamese Navy, explained, "The Pigs and Chickens Program certainly allowed our people the opportunity to benefit from strains of livestock which would provide a breeding base of hearty animals from the United States to improve the characteristics of our indigenous stock. However, the investment was more importantly represented not merely in animals but in the benefits of training and mutual cooperation."[14]

Another aspect of ACTOV was the establishment of a small facility for the building of ferro-cement boats. These boats were constructed by forming a shaped lattice work of iron or

steel and tieing it together with wire. The wire was then impregnated with cement. The facility gave the VNN the capability of replacing small craft which were also resistant to teredo worms (teredo worms quickly rotted wooden-hulled boats in the South Vietnamese coastal waters).[15] As time progressed the VNN became more proficient at operating this facility and were able to produce more elaborate craft including a relatively effective coastal raider.

The above-mentioned ancillary parts of ACTOV are presented to illustrate the totality of effort involved beyond the mere turning over of naval assets. Admiral Zumwalt explains further,

> It's terribly important to graft on to their culture the essential traditions without the unnecessary traditions. I felt that we had to understand that in their culture the family is even more significant than it is in ours. The family comes way before country in their concept and therefore we had to show that our first concern was to be able to feed those families and house them or we weren't going to get anywhere. And then with that clearly being done, and as they could see it being done, we could concentrate very hard on teaching them the tradition of "don't give up the ship" and of cohesive teamwork and of "never surrender the fleet." I think we were successful in that--as they were the only service that didn't surrender, but rather took aboard their ships their families and left--turning the ships back to us at Subic Bay.[16]

The ACTOV plan submitted to General Abrams following the briefing described at the start of this chapter called for the turnover of 2 DEs, 8 LSTs, 1 ARL, 2 YRBMs, 8 PCEs, 22 PGMs, 100 PCFs, 250 PBRs, 354 riverine assault craft, 16 WPBs, and 104 assorted logistic and yard craft.[17] The COMNAVFORV staff conducted close monitoring of the turnover schedule to include the training pipeline, communications support, and logistics facilities. The U.S. Navy was consistently out in front of the other services in Vietnamization.[18]

The first major transfer of assets occurred on 1 February 1969 when twenty-five river assault craft from Task Force 117 were turned over to the VNN. Admiral Zumwalt and Commodore Chon presided at the ceremony. The twenty-five craft were formed into two River Assault and Interdiction Divisions (RAID) and immediately began operations in the Giant Slingshot campaign.[19] Captain Price (CTF 117) was assigned a Vietnamese commander as his

deputy, and the integration of the Vietnamese unit went smoothly.[20] In June of 1969 sixty-four more river assault craft were transferred to the VNN. These were organized into four RAIDs which brought the number of VNN RAIDs to a total of six. These were organized into Amphibious Task Force 211 (ATF 211).[21] By August of 1969 the bulk of the assault craft had been turned over to the Vietnamese and the Mobile Riverine Force was disestablished.

Turnover for other classes of boats proceeded similarly. For the larger coastal patrol craft, the PCFs (Swift Boats), a program known as Swift Training and Rapid Turnover (START) was initiated. Several techniques were employed in order to enhance the various training programs. One of these was the color coding of engine room piping systems and the use of stenciling arrows to indicate the direction of flow of the liquid.[22] On 31 October 1969 thirteen PCFs were turned over to the VNN. These, combined with the turnover of Coast Guard patrol craft was the first step for the VNN in assuming the former Market Time mission and assets.

On 11 August 1969, ten PBRs were turned over to the VNN. These were the first river patrol craft to be transferred to the VNN. These were followed in October 1969 by the transfer of eighty PBRs to the VNN. The VNN divided the eighty PBRs into four River Patrol Groups--RPGs 51, 52, 53, and 54--and placed them under the control of Vietnamese Task Force 212.[23] The RPGs were immediately incorporated into SEALORDS operations. Subsequent turnovers followed a similar pattern.

By 30 September 1970 the cumulative craft turnover since 1 January 1969 numbered 514 vessels. These included 250 PBRs, over 100 of the larger coastal patrol craft (PCFs and WHECs), and over 90 percent of the River Assault and Interdiction inventory.[24] During this same time VNN personnel strength was reported at 39,136. MACV reports indicated that boat turnovers were on schedule and that VNN craft employment was satisfactory.[25]

Concomitant with the material turnover came the assumption of control over the various SEALORDS operations. In March of 1970 the VNN assumed command of the Tran Hung Dao I interdiction barrier along the Cambodian border. By the end of the summer of 1970 all the interdiction barriers would be under VNN control with only advisory assistance from the U.S. The Giant Slingshot operation was renamed Tran Hung Dao II in May of 1970. The last SEALORDS operation to be turned over to the Vietnamese was Solid Anchor (previously the floating base Seafloat and now based ashore at Nam Can) in April 1971.[26]

A significant milestone that occurred during ACTOV was the May 1970 invasion of Cambodia. In support of the USA-ARVN broader mission to destroy enemy sanctuary facilities in Cambodia, a large, combined USN-VNN naval task force was formed. The naval aspect of the mission was to secure a ferry crossing point on the Cambodian Mekong. Additionally, the VNN were tasked with proceeding up the Mekong to Phnom Penh to evacuate refugees.[27] For political reasons this was to be a solo mission for the VNN. The VNN performed well, meeting all schedules and successfully evacuating many more refugees than had originally been planned.[28]

In an interview for this study, when asked for his thoughts on the Cambodian incursion and on ACTOV in general, Vice Admiral Tran Van Chon (former VNN CNO) replied,

> These successes indeed demonstrated our growing capability to prevail in battle-the result of superior equipment, training, tactics, and the resolve of our personnel. It is clear that we had a superiority in being able to combine a strategy of afloat, land, and air assets to get the upper hand in confrontations as large as the Cambodian invasion. As noted above, the VNN had a superior knowledge of our terrain and waterways. Our bond with the Vietnamese people assisted us in gaining necessary intelligence and cooperation to sustain our mission. Nonetheless, it is not fair to say that there was "no USN involvement." Aside from the forward-deployed fighting forces who may have been primarily Vietnamese, our American counterparts assisted us through an array of vital intelligence, communications, supply, and combat support functions where the USN has long demonstrated its expertise and commitment.[29]

This is not to say that ACTOV did not have its share of problems. With the VNN having expanded so rapidly, there were bound to be "growing pains." These included minor pay problems which affected the morale of junior personnel. There were also disciplinary problems with unauthorized absences in some of the units. The most significant problem was the shortage of qualified officers and petty officers. In order to alleviate this problem, a program was adopted to train 750 officer candidates at the Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island.[30]

Another obstacle to overcome was that of preventive maintenance. The VNN had demonstrated their ability to conduct rather complex maintenance and repair in the Saigon shipyards. Routine maintenance in the field, however, was not always uniformly conducted. Admiral William J. Crowe, Jr., USN (Retired), who as a Captain served as a naval advisor in Vietnam, states in his memoirs:

> My first priority after taking over the senior adviser's job was to reorganize the entire maintenance and spare parts system for boat upkeep, making it much simpler. The simplification helped, but in the end the task required intensified maintenance training. I beefed up training but it was still hard to get the Vietnamese to grasp the importance of these unexciting routines. Yet without good maintenance naval forces cannot function. And here again the problem was cultural. Vietnamese boys had not come of age driving cars; they didn't grow up fixing mechanical gadgets.[31]

On 15 May 1970, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., was relieved as Commander, Naval Forces Vietnam. His record in Vietnam, and in no small part ACTOV, had greatly assisted his meteoric rise to become the youngest CNO in U.S. Naval history. His relieving remarks capture the spirit of ACTOV at the time,

> As I look back over these last 20 months, I see a map of South Vietnam with the Navy operating along the edges...in Market Time along the coast, in pacification operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone, and in the Nam Can area and in the latter part, completely along the Cambodian border in Operation SEALORDS. And I see that map changing from blue, representing the U.S. Navy, to green, representing the Vietnamese Navy, all along and throughout that area. The Marine Corps (VNMC) expanding by 50 percent and the Navy (VNN) by 120 percent . . . [32]

Rear Admiral Rauch, then a captain, who had spearheaded Zumwalt's ACTOV iniatives was equally upbeat. After compiling statistics between 30 September 1968 and 31 March 1970, Rauch wrote a letter stating that during this period the personnel strength had doubled; the Vietnamese school graduates per month had increased by a factor of seven, English language graduates by a factor of over thirty, and total engagements with the enemy had grown by a factor of thirteen. At the end of this letter he wrote, "I leave feeling that in view of the strengths listed above there is cause for optimism."[33]

When further pressed on whether he thought that ACTOV was ultimately a doomed venture, Rauch provided an insightful response,

> No, not when we left at all. The only way it could have been doomed was if our country would not have continued to provide some logistics support because, simply, they could not continue on their own. They could do all the maintenance, they could do anything that we could do. They were carrying out operations. I'm talking about the Navy (VNN) now. They were carrying out operations, some of which exceeded the kinds of things that we were doing. . . . So they were operating. They were maintaining. It looked like from our perspective, if the other services were doing as well as the Navy was and we could just simply keep the spare parts going over there, it looked like it was not doomed, it looked like there was a possibility of success. I think the worry was that the U.S. people would not support even continuing to send supplies and once that happened then it was doomed. Once we realized that the country was no more going to support anything, then it was a doomed operation.[34]

As can be seen, In Rauch's opinion, continued U.S. logistical support was absolutely essential if ACTOV was to work. Due to U.S. strategic foreign policy decisions and the Congressional cutbacks in funding for South Vietnam, however, eventually this support was not there. These U.S. decisions have a great impact on any analysis of ACTOV. The bounds of the problem had shifted. As a deeper understanding of what happened and what was possible with ACTOV is sought, the assessment of Admiral Tran Van Chon, former CNO of the VNN, is food for thought.

In a recent personal interview carried out as part of this study, Admiral Chon said that he felt that ACTOV was extremely successful. He attributed this success to the close working relationship between himself and Admiral Zumwalt which filtered down through both chains of command. Admiral Chon remembers:

> Admiral Zumwalt's ACTOV plan had been in effect as a formal priority for well over five years by the time of the principal American withdrawal in-country. As such, we had gained a considerable amount of experience by then. Of course, we would have preferred to have achieved maximum strength in face of the determined enemy. It may be fair to say that the "Vietnamization plan" was no longer in effect. We were substantially on our own and the success of our abilities was up to what we had developed at that point in time.[35]

In this interview Admiral Chon went on to stress that care should be given not to evaluate the success of ACTOV based on the fall of Saigon and the results of the war. He maintained that the VNN had desired to continue the fight in the end and had requested to do so from the Mekong River. Chon also stressed that the VNN represented less than 10 percent of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam and that the problems were with the higher echelons of the military and the South Vietnamese government itself. As a postscript, after the fall of Saigon, Rear Admiral Tran Van Chon spent twelve years and three months in a "reeducation camp" in Hanoi.[36]

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[1]Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., Admiral, USN (Ret.), interview by author, Arlington, VA, 23 September 1996, 10.

[2]Howard J. Kerr, Jr , Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.), interview by Paul Stillwell, Arlington, VA, 22 September 1982.

[3]Ibid., 47.

[4]Zumwalt, interview, 10.

[5]Charles F. Rauch, Jr., Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy (Retired), interview No.1 conducted by Paul Stilwell, 25 October 1982. 31.

[6]R. L. Schreadley, From the Rivers to the Sea (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1992), 337.

[7]Arthur W. Price, Jr., Rear Admiral, USN (Ret.), "Reminiscences of Rear Admiral Arthur W. Price, Jr.," Oral History Department, U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD., 458.

[8]Rauch, interview, 60.

[9]Charles F. Rauch, Jr, Rear Admiral, USN, (Ret.), telephone interview by author 7 April 1997.

[10]Rauch, interview, 62.

[11]Schreadley, 354.

[12]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, March 1970 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1970), 131.

[13]Thomas J. Cutler, Brown Water, Black Berets (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 349.

[14]Tran Van Chon, Rear Admiral, VNN (Ret), telephone nterview by author, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 11 January 1997.

[15]Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., On Watch: A Memoir (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1976), 40.

[16]Zumwalt, interview, 15.

[17]Schreadley, 331.

[18]Cutler, 349.

[19]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary February, 1969 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1969), 4.

[20]Price, interview, 457.

[21]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, June 1969 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1969), 1.

[22]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, July 1969 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1969), 101.

[23]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, October 1969 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1969), 113.

[24]Department of the Army, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, MACV Seer Report, 3rd Qtr CY70 (APO San Francisco, CA: Dept. of Army, October 1970), 98.

[25]Ibid., 96.

[26]Edward J. Marolda, By Sea, Air, and Land (Washington DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1994), 290.

[27]Cutler, 354.

[28]Ibid., 354.

[29]Chon, interview,3.

[30]Schreadley, 344.

[31]William J. Crowe, Jr., The Line of Fire (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 80.

[32]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary, May 1970 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1970), 2.

[33]Rauch, interview, 124.

[34]Ibid., 123.

[35]Chon, interview, 3.

[36]Ibid.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

> It was a success within the context that anything in Vietnam was a success, yes. However, in the overall view of things, the way we operated, the way our leadership brought us into and allowed us to operate in Vietnam, it's extremely difficult to say anything was a success. But in terms of interdicting the enemy in the Delta, in terms of pacifying the Delta, because of Sealords, the southern part of III Corps and all of IV Corps was, in 1970, supportive of the Saigon Government, generally under control and ready to be transitioned to a peaceful state had we been tough enough overall with respect to North Vietnam. So it was a success in that context.[1]
>
> Captain Robert Powers, USN (Retired)

The above quotation illustrates the paradoxical problem in attempting to evaluate the success of a given operation or campaign in the context of Vietnam. However, it is the stark fact that the overall war effort was a disconcerting failure that gives such import to the analysis and finding of operational successes. That the war may represent a political or strategic failure does not diminish the valuable lessons that can be learned from such study. In order to answer the primary research question, Was the SEALORDS campaign successful? three subordinate research questions must first be answered. First, was the barrier interdiction portion of the campaign successful in stemming the flow of men and arms into South Vietnam? Second, was the Denial of Sanctuary and Pacification portion of the operation successful? And last, what was the effectiveness of the ACTOV program? Each of these questions will be answered in turn.

Barrier Interdiction

Zumwalt's SEALORDS strategy of going on the offensive and creating patrol barriers was a major change in focus for the Brown-Water Navy. By concentrating naval forces athwart the major infiltration routes along the Cambodian border, SEALORDS effectively cut enemy lines of communication into South Vietnam and severely restricted enemy attempts at infiltration. Why this change in strategy had not been attempted before is not entirely clear. It appears that it took a change of command (Zumwalt) and less aversion to risk to carry it off. Rear Admiral Price, then a captain and Commander CTF 116, captures this sentiment:

> Admiral Veth's (Zumwalt's predecessor) idea was to try to get the Vietnamese to do more, but I don't think he was interested in opening up new avenues. In other words, he knew the areas that we were required to patrol and he didn't want to see us get involved in any new pieces of real estate and lose lives and boats. That was his philosophy-unless he thought we could win, of course but when you're in the river patrol force you never know. . . . So his theory was don't go out there and get yourself all shot up, you might accomplish nothing. When Zumwalt took over, he had a different philosophy. He felt that the only way we were going to get this over with was to get your ass out there and find them, find out what they are, and start taking back some of this real estate.[2]

In a briefing at COMUSMACV Headquarters on 21 October 1968, with the SEALORDS campaign in its infancy, General Creighton Abrams described with enthusiasm the forays into IV CTZ by Navy boats "in what had been pure unadulterated VC territory." It was his opinion that this was "a pretty good development" and contributing significantly to the dry season counteroffensive.[3] An additional indicator of the early successes of the inland naval blockades and interdiction pursuits was reflected in a December 1968 intelligence report. This report, based on information provided an by an executive officer of an enemy transportation company, stated that a thirty-day backlog of VC supplies and munitions existed due to USN patrols along the Rach Gia/Long Xuyen Canal.[4] This was one of the first areas interdicted/blockaded during the SEALORDS campaign as part of Operation Search Turn.

It is instructive to review a breakdown of the statistics for the various SEALORDS operations. The following cumulative data is provided as of 1 April 1970:[5]

	Tran Hung Dao	Giant Slingshot	Barrier Reef	Search Turn	Ready Deck
Enemy KIA:					
BY USN	271	1096	92	242	340
BY VNN	69	162	31	0	85
Other	295	1057	111	51	246
Friendly KIA:					
USN	12	38	6	16	6
VNN	9	17	0	0	0
FRIFF	247	509	73	175	51
ENIFF	198	716	56	90	62
AMMO CACHES	7	275	1	14	22
CACHE WT (TONS)	11.5	142.9	.4	12	4.3

While it is difficult to quantify measures of effectiveness with respect to the interdiction barriers, the above data in terms of enemy KIAs (Killed in Action), ammunition captured, and both friendly and enemy initiated firefights (ENIFF/FRIFF) is at least partial evidence of the success of the interdiction effort. What it does not capture is the cost to the enemy in terms of finding alternative routes of resupply, nor does it measure the amount of men and material that the enemy was actually able to infiltrate. This data can only be obtained (if at all) from the former North Vietnamese.

A study conducted by the Navy Electronics Laboratory Center in August 1970, that assessed quantitatively the effectiveness of the barrier interdiction strategy concluded that:

> (1) The line barrier is superior to patrolling as a means of infiltration interdiction but it is by no means impenetrable.
>
> (2) The river interdiction barriers cause the enemy severe operational problems as they greatly increase the enemy's logistic lead time and make it difficult to assemble the requisite material for a large scale operation.[6]

This last finding bears significant study. The 1968 Tet Offensive had proven that the Vietcong were capable of infiltrating enough arms to conduct a major offensive. This offensive, although a tactical defeat for the Vietcong, caused a major shift in American domestic public opinion and eroded much of the U.S. support for the war effort. It is considered a major turning point. Following the inception of SEALORDS in late 1968, there were no major offensives in 1969 or 1970. This situation may at least be partially attributable to SEALORDS' ability to seriously affect the communist infiltration effort. Carrying this one step further, in a personal interview conducted as part of this study, Admiral Zumwalt, when asked if he thought that his program, if implemented a year earlier, could have prevented the TET Offensive, gave the following intriguing answer:

> I think had we had that program in effect (blockading the border) two years earlier, maybe even one year earlier, that they would not have been able to infiltrate the supplies necessary to support Tet.[7]

Denial of Sanctuary Operations and Pacification

> I remember when I came back again (1970), a couple of years later, I could not believe the extent to which pacification had proceeded in the Delta. Certain areas were still Vietcong areas, but they were relatively few. You could drive with impunity over roads that were just an invitation to an ambush earlier. And, in the delta the river interdiction campaign had a great deal to do with that. Also, the enemy's action in Tet 68 of committing all of its first line troops and getting them chewed up in that horrendous campaign was a blow from which he never recovered.[8]
>
> Vice Admiral Robert S. Salzer, Oral History

The above comments, taken from an interview conducted with Vice Admiral Robert Salzer, USN (Retired), point to the tremendous gains made in pacification by mid-1970. The denial of sanctuary operations and pacification effort were entirely complementary to the barrier interdiction effort. With the barrier interdiction campaign seriously curtailing enemy infiltration efforts, the denial/pacification made matters worse for the enemy by also denying him a major source of revenue in the form of tax extortion.[9] Once freed from this threat of extortion and harassment, the civilian populace would begin to make progress in the areas of economic development and peaceful commerce.[10]

Operation Seafloat provided the best example of a denial of sanctuary-pacification operation at work. Commencing in June 1969, this operation established a presence in the lower Ca Mau peninsula, a long-held enemy sanctuary. Using a floating base to establish a tenuous foothold in the Cua Lon River, operations were then conducted to reclaim this vital area. As the local populace realized that Seafloat was there to stay, a village began to emerge near the base.[11] By December of 1969, in just five months, the population had grown to 4,000.[12]

Another measure of effectiveness in terms of pacification was the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). This system, used by the CIA and COMUSMACV, and described in former CIA Director William Colby's book Lost Victory, used a ranking system to rate hamlet security. Using six alphabetical rankings, the first three (A, B, and C) describe levels of relative security with letter A indicating the highest level of security. Letters D and E indicated locales that were "contested". The letter V signified Communist control.[13] Tactical maps of the Mekong Delta contrasting 1967 hamlet evaluation system results with results recorded in 1971 clearly indicated significant progress in pacification. The better grades of A, B, and C had replaced Vs throughout the Delta.[14]

Colonel George Jacobson, USA, (Retired), then serving as Mission Coordinator for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and working for Colby at the time, provided some indication of the contribution that the SEALORDS campaign was making to the overall pacification effort in a briefing to General Abrams in June of 1969:

> Since Admiral Zumwalt and Admiral Flanagan (Zumwalt's Deputy) have been here, the Navy support to pacification, and the operations that they have done, is about five light years better than anything that we've seen before. It's been of great, great assistance.[15]

Other indicators point to the success of the Denial of Sanctuary operations and Pacification. One is what was referred to in Vietnam as Hoi Chanhs. Hoi Chanhs were former communists who had "rallied" to the South Vietnamese side. Within a typical month during the SEALORDS campaign Hoi Chanhs would average between 12 and 15. Some months saw many more. In July 1969 there was a record high of 208. Personal hardship, heavy personnel losses, and hunger were the most common reasons given by the VC for surrendering.[16]

Psychological Operations and a strong Civic Action Program accelerated the pacification effort. Efforts ranging anywhere from providing medical and dental care to displaced civilians to the construction of schools, orphanages, and swingsets paid huge dividends in securing the public trust. In one two day period in September 1969, USN and VNN sailors participating in the Vietnamese mid-autumn Tet Trung Thu festival, contacted over 12,000 people. Special festival kits and other articles including toys, balloons, and candy for the children were distributed to the populace.[17] The considerable leverage that actions such as these provided to pacification and the overall war effort can not be discounted and is best illustrated in the following summary:

> And, as the village grew, so did the effective PSYOPS (Psychological Operations) program. . . . These goals were attained through direct contact with the local people who came on board Seafloat units . . . and medical and dental assistance-an impressive combination of warfare and "peacefare."[18]

ACTOV

With the ACTOV Program the U.S. Navy took the lead over the other services with respect to Vietnamization. During the SEALORDS campaign U.S. Naval forces in-country declined from a peak of 38,083 personnel in September 1968 to 16,757 at the end of 1970.[19] At the same time, these reduced forces were able to carry on a tremendously successful offensive campaign. While this may appear as somewhat of a paradox, it is not. Instead, it speaks to the success of ACTOV. In the words of Dr. Ed Marolda, "ACTOV was a force multiplier; it allowed us (USN) to conduct a drawdown and go on the offensive at the same time."[20]

By the end of 1970, all the river craft in the COMNAVFORV inventory had been successfully turned over to the South Vietnamese. Concomitant with the turnover of material assets came the assumption of control by the VNN over the various SEALORDS operations. In March of 1970 the VNN assumed command of the Tran Hung Dao I interdiction barrier along the Cambodian border. By the end of the summer of 1970 all the interdiction barriers were under VNN control with only advisory assistance from the U.S. Admiral Tran Van Chon, VNN CNO during ACTOV, comments on how confident he felt with the VNN taking over the various SEALORDS operations:

> From my perspective, the Vietnamese Navy (VNN) was well-prepared for the task at hand represented in SEALORDS. First, the combined allied forces were reputed to be at their strongest at that time-the Fall of 1968. Principally, USN and VNN forces were poised to take their assets and experience from a principally coastal protection and interdiction mission to that of denying the enemy it's supply routes "inland" from Cambodia. Secondly, in beginning the process of transition to VNN Forces in a "brown-water" capacity, it allowed the VNN to demonstrate its advantages over USN personnel in a knowledge of the geography and the indigenous Vietnamese population and language. We were able to integrate and exploit the best capabilities of each of the combined allied forces. Third, even in the naming the operation "Tran Hung Dao," it signaled the recognition that the VNN was beginning its ascendancy in the naval war. You may be aware that Tran Hung Dao was the "Patron Saint" of the VNN-akin to John Paul Jones to your Navy. He was successful in defeating the Chinese in a series of historical battles centuries ago.[21]

By 1970 VNN forces were able to demonstrate their ability to conduct effective operations in the absence of any significant U.S. Navy involvement. A prime example of this is the May 1970 Cambodian incursion in which the VNN acquitted themselves well in what was primarily a solo effort with respect to riverine forces.

In a strategic context, ACTOV should also be viewed as a success in that it allowed for the orderly withdrawal of U.S. Naval forces from Vietnam during a time in which there was no longer a mandate for their continued presence. That the Vietnamization program in general was flawed and built on the false premises of continued Congressional support and funding should not detract from the substantial gains achieved during ACTOV. Finally, the emphatic belief in the success of ACTOV by Admiral Tran Van Chon, the commander who was on the receiving end of the program and is therefore well suited to evaluate it, lends credibility to these findings.

Conclusions

The SEALORDS campaign epitomized the maturation of riverine warfare in Vietnam. But it was much more than that. At all levels of warfare, strategic, operational, and tactical the campaign demonstrated the unique capabilities of the Brown-Water Navy. The barrier interdiction strategy was able to cutoff enemy lines of communication from his Cambodian sanctuaries. The Denial of Sanctuary and Pacification operations were successful in winning back the delta, the most strategically vital region in South Vietnam. Finally, the Accelerated Turnover Program (ACTOV) put the Navy out ahead of the other services with respect to Vietnamization and the successful execution of this program allowed for the conduct of a bold offensive campaign concurrent with the drawdown of U.S. Naval forces.

For the above-mentioned reasons, the SEALORDS campaign is evaluated as successful. "SEALORDS put a new face on the naval war in Vietnam."[22] Valuable lessons can be learned

from the SEALORDS campaign that can be applied to future naval forces operating in the littoral regions.

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[1]Robert Powers, Captain, USN (Ret.), interview No.1 conducted by Etta Belle Kitchen, on 30 October 1982.

[2]Arthur W. Price, Jr., Rear Admiral, USN (Ret.), "Reminiscences of Rear Admiral Arthur W. Price, Jr.," Oral History Department, U.S. Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD., 484.

[3]Lewis Sorley, interview by aurthor, 20 April 1997.

[4]COMNAVFORV Message DTG 260203Z December 1968.

[5]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary April 1970 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1969), 27.

[6]Department of the Navy, Operations Analysis Branch, An Analysis of Interdiction Barrier Operations and Effectiveness on SEALORDS Operations Tran Hung Dao, Barrier Reef and Giant Slingshot (San Diego, CA: Navy Electronics Laboratory Center, July 1970), I.

[7]Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., Admiral, USN (Ret.), personal interview by author, Arlington, VA, 23 September 1996.

[8]Robert S. Salzer, Vice Admiral, USN (RET), Interview No.7 conducted by John T. Mason (Annapolis, MD: Oral History Department, U.S. Naval Institute, 17 May 1977), 495.

[9]Richard L. Schreadley, "SEALORDS," Proceedings, 96 (August 1970), 27.

[10]Ibid., 26.

[11]Thomas R. M. Emery, "River Power," Proceedings, 95 (July 1970), 119.

[12]Ibid., 119.

[13]William E. Colby, Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 254.

[14]Ibid., 420-421.

[15]Sorley, interview, 3.

[16]Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam, Monthly Historical Summary September 1969 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1969), 115.

[17]Ibid., 113.

[18]Emery, 120.

[19]Edward J. Marolda, By Sea, Air, and Land (Washington DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1994), 293.

[20]Edward J. Marolda, Personal interview by author, Washington, DC, 23 September 1996.

[21]Tran Van Chon, Rear Admiral, VNN (Ret.), telephone interview by author, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 11 January, 1997.

[22]Sealords, 31.

Figure 1. Mekong Delta

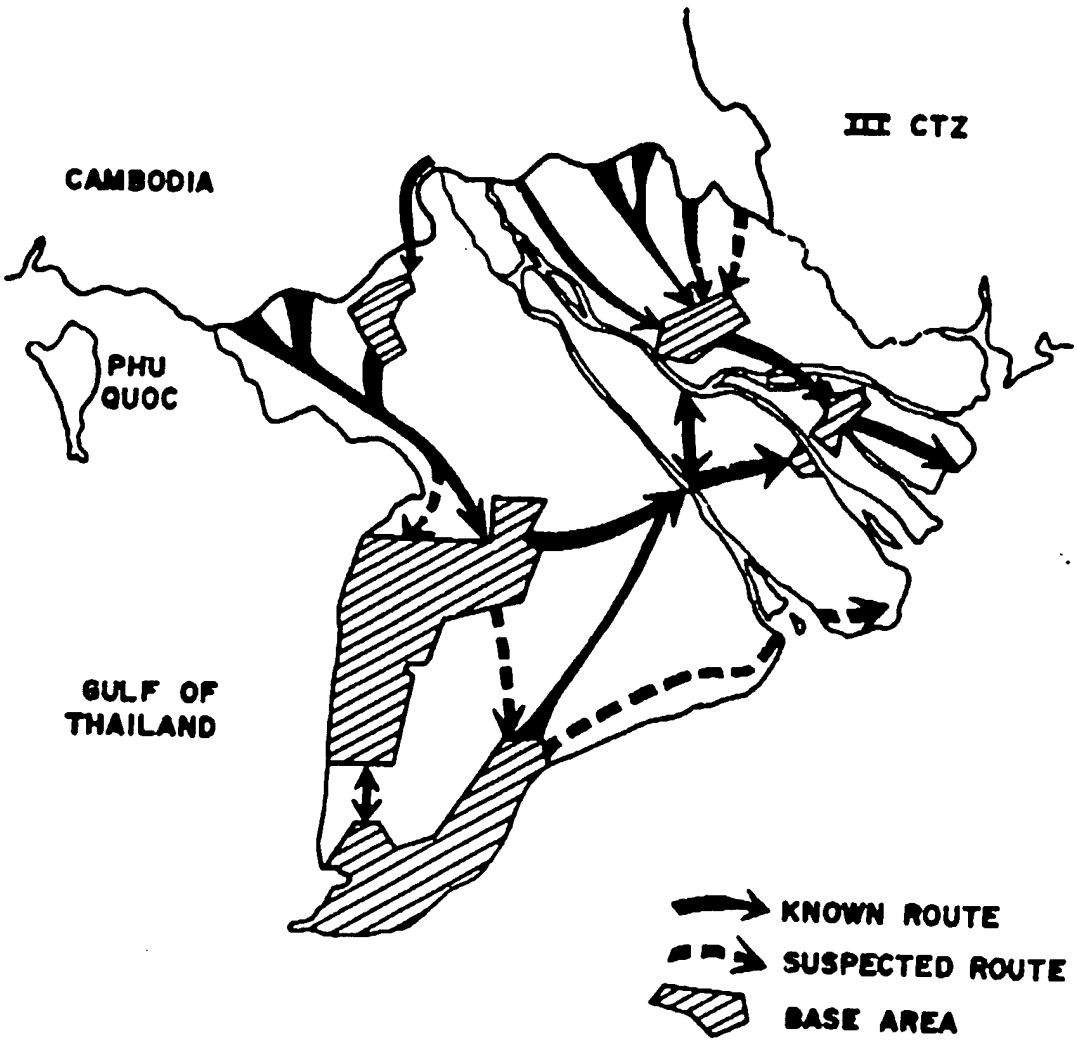

Figure 2. Enemy Infiltration Routes into the Mekong Delta

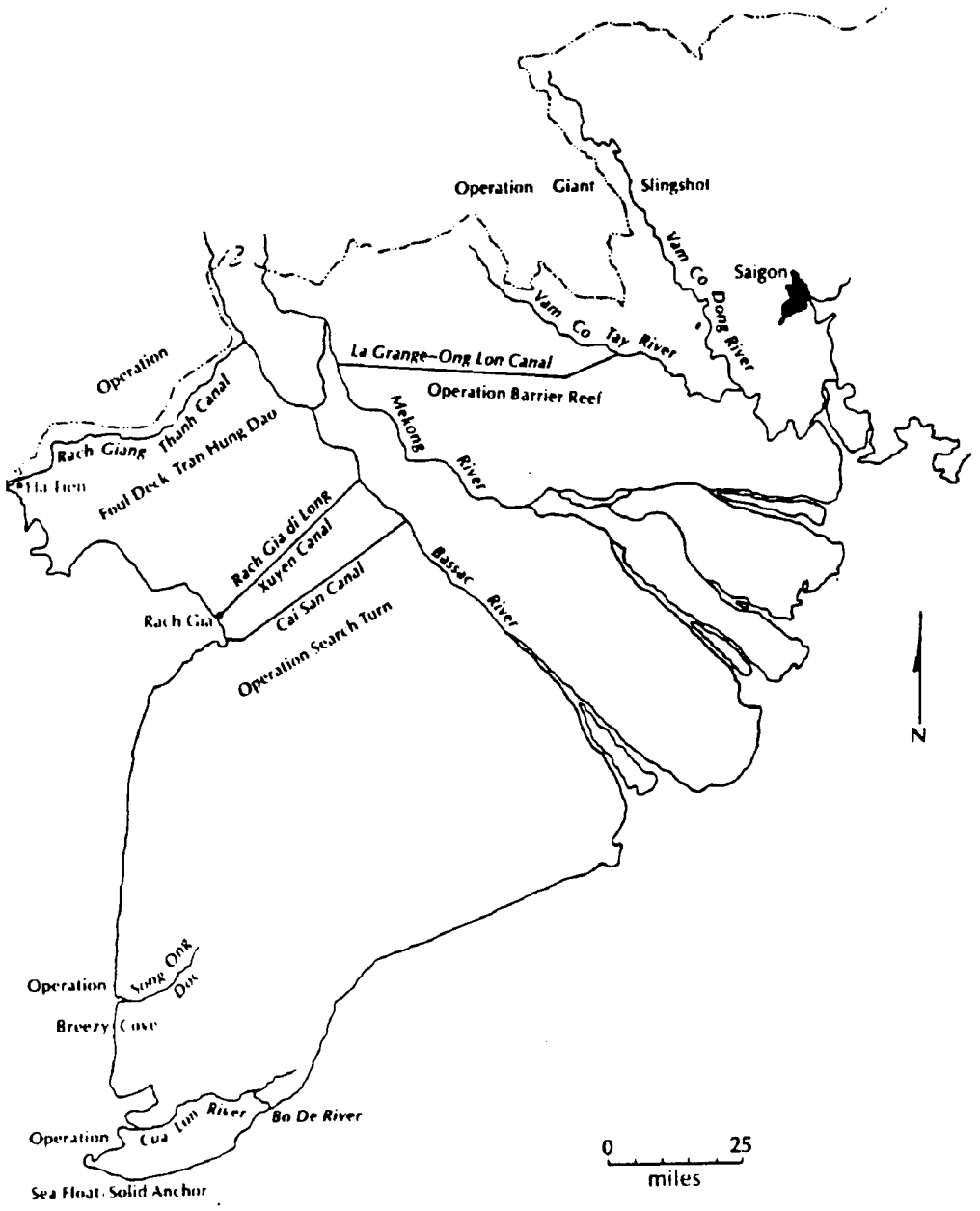

Figure 3. SEALORDS Operations

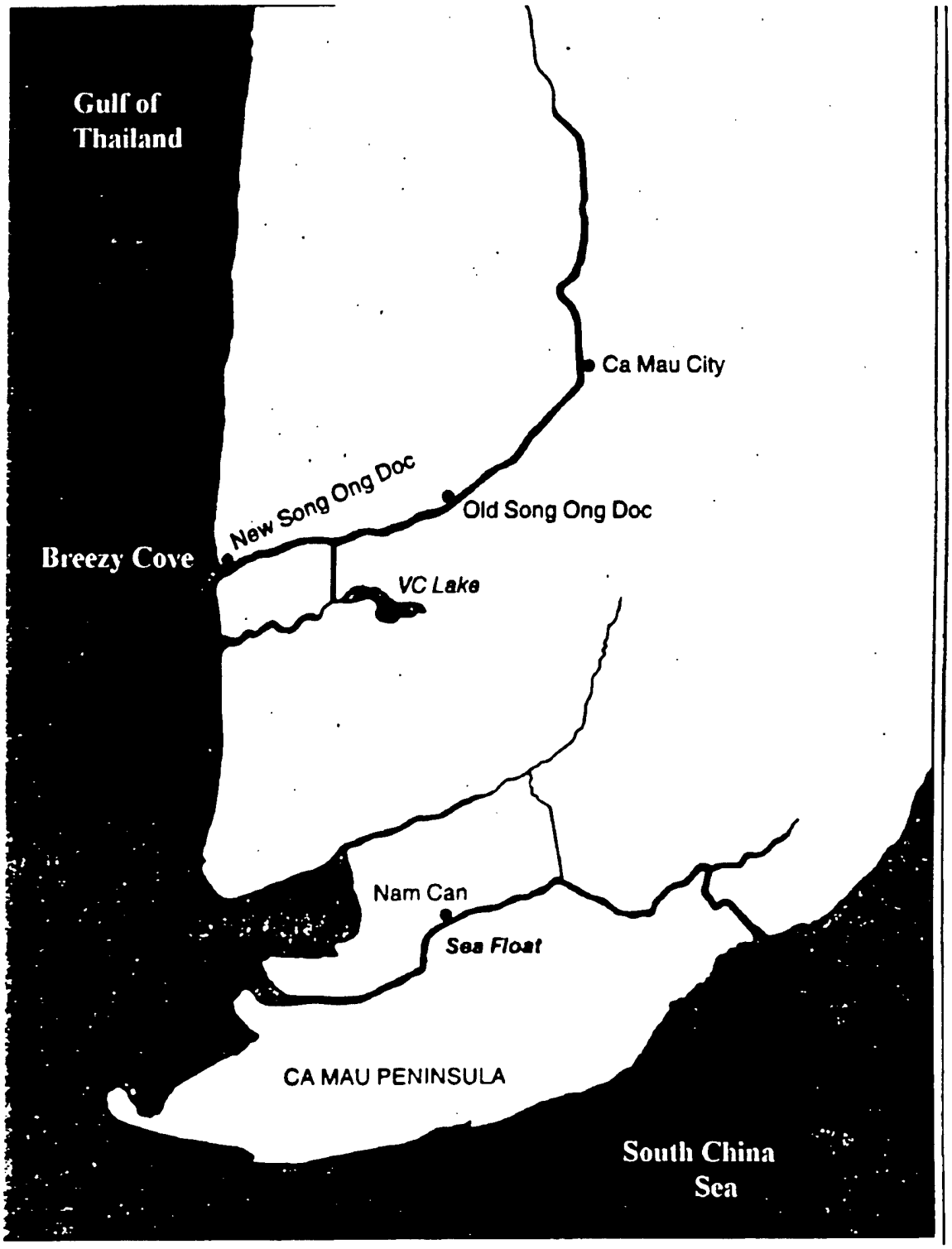

Figure 4. Sea Float/Breezy Cove

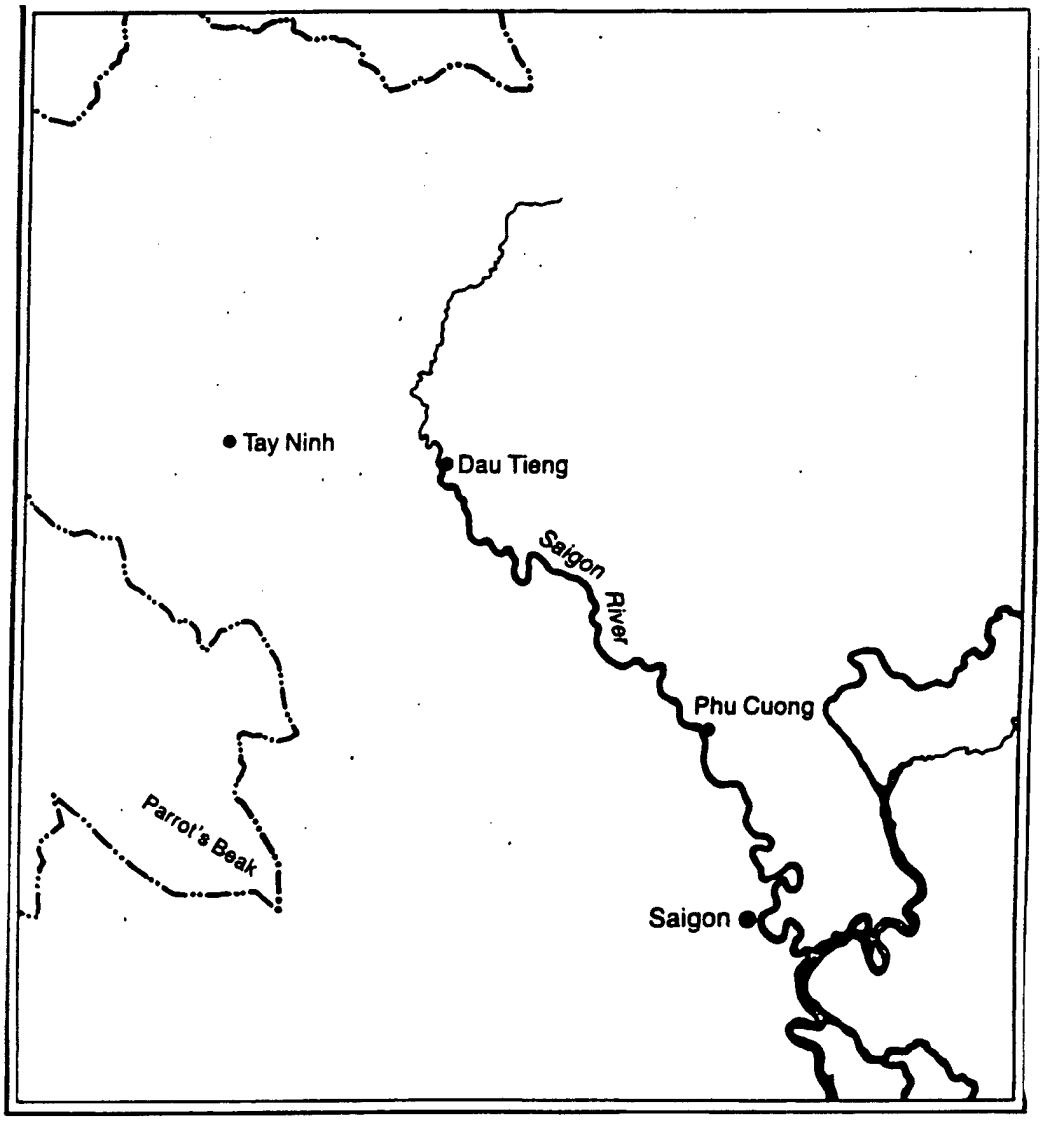

Figure 5. Ready Deck

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